

AND WHEN SHE WAS BAD

by

BARBARA BROOKS

An Original Novel

A MIDWOOD BOOK

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All characters and situations
in this book are fictitious.

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AND WHEN SHE WAS BAD

ONE

The late afternoon sun was just sinking below the distant hills as the girl sauntered listlessly into the expensively appointed bedroom. She closed the door behind her and leaned back against it, closing her eyes momentarily. Then, rousing herself, she dropped the tennis racket on a nearby chair and shrugged out of the cashmere cardigan draped over her shoulders.

Arms folded over her high-peaked breasts, she paced about the room restlessly, stopping finally to light a cigarette and inhale on it nervously. She went to stand at the window that looked out over a huge expanse of green lawn. She smoked fretfully, her forehead pressing against the cool glass, her body still gleaming moistly from the exertion on the sun-baked tennis court, causing the white blouse and brief shorts to cling damply to her rounded body.

She turned away, scowling, and crushed the cigarette in the tray. Then she commenced the nervous and tense pacing, a nerve in her tanned cheek twitching.

bruptly, she stopped, discovering her hands were perspiring—and spasmodically clenching them-
es into fists which hurt her palms.

"This is absolutely crazy," she said aloud to the
bathroom, the sound of her voice startling her.

She went to the walk-in closet and stood before the
full-length mirror.

Looking back at her was a pretty girl of average
height. She knew—indeed, she'd been told many
times—that not much else about her was average.

She stared into a face which was marked by a short,
straight nose, full lips and cheeks which were flushed
now with color and dampness. Her hair was auburn
and cut short so that it curled up at the ends. Dominat-
ing the face were those black eyes which were a fam-
ily trademark. The eyes seemed to represent the ag-
gressiveness, the breeding and the leadership which
went into the makeup of any Hood woman, or man.

The eyes drifted lower, to her soiled blouse, which
hung damply to her upper body, molding a pair of
high and rounded breasts, breasts which rose and fell
rapidly as she sucked in short breaths of air. Still
lower were the impossibly thin waist, the rounding
hips and the flawless legs emerging from her tightly-
cut shorts.

She turned to look at her profile. Above, the breasts
rose proudly, their ends high and aristocratic, despite
her otherwise bedraggled appearance. Below, her flat
stomach was sucked in properly and her derriere pro-
truded with a rounded stylishness which was the envy
of almost every girl she knew.

Gently she placed each hand on her buttocks, cupping the firm flesh softly, without pressure. Here, she knew all too well, was also the seat of her passion. The place where screaming nerve ends had made that once triggered wanton desire when she might have been able to control herself otherwise.

Here, she thought ruefully, was where the fumbling fingers of occasional boys had attacked her vulnerable flesh, reducing her to a defenseless target for their immature desires . . . defeating her will to behave like the young lady they'd taught her to be at finishing school.

Sighing, she turned away from the mirror and crossed to the bed, sitting down heavily.

Unwillingly, her thoughts turned to Gary. Good old dependable Gary. Dependable and dull, dull, dull!

She knew she could depend on him to let her win an occasional set of tennis (as he'd done that afternoon on the lower court); be on time for every date, and be terribly understanding when she resisted his amateur advances.

But what about the times when she didn't resist enough? Those were the times when her body screamed out, when she needed someone so much that even the plodding advances of Gary would suffice.

She always hated herself later, when she reminded herself that she wasn't a wanton girl. But she was a healthy, normal woman with a set of desires to match her flawless figure.

Besides, Gary Williams was a gentleman who fitted

the mold of her social stratum. A gentleman who wouldn't kiss and tell.

Jayde Hood got up and unbuttoned her blouse, dropping it to the floor. She reached behind and unsnapped her brassiere, tossing it aside and idly touching the still damp skin of her breasts, feeling their warmth. She kicked off her tennis shoes and stepped out of her shorts and panties, running her hands the length of her torso, still wondering at its heat and dampness.

Minutes later, settling back in the huge tub, she let the water lap up to her chin and pulled her knees high.

Was it really only the tennis match which had heated her body so? Or was her body matching her distraught, frustrated mental wanderings?

What's wrong, Jayde old doll, she asked, looking down the length of her body, watching the oiled water play with the sides of her breasts and lap over her thighs.

So you're bored with Gary Williams, the all-American stockbroker. So you're tired of knowing exactly what is going to happen every day of your life. You're even too bored to want to travel away from it all with another grand tour of London and the Left-Bank bistros of Paris.

No, she'd discovered she couldn't run away. Whatever solution she sought had to be found in the world of reality.

But reality didn't mean marrying Gary, that much

she knew. She wasn't hitching her wagon to a walking copy of the Wall Street Journal, to a predictable lover from the predictable world of the socially and financially secure. Ever since her early teens, he'd been pursuing her, engagement ring in hand, refusing to take her indifference seriously. Oh, she felt something for him . . . a kind of tenderness . . . but not an all-consuming love.

Jayde sighed and stood up in the tub, rinsing and then drying herself with a thick towel. The warmth and sensitivity of her flesh annoyed her and forced her to think ahead to her date with him. Hell, how am I going to keep him at a distance when I'm having trouble making my own hands behave? She had a feeling she didn't stand a ghost of a chance.

Jayde sipped her drink and stared out at the twinkling harbor lights, aware that she was behaving badly, like a spoiled brat. The lush interior of the exclusive nightclub did nothing to dispel her boredom and the steady drinking only seemed to add to her depression.

"Hey, remember me?"

She turned her head to look at Gary blankly. He smiled. "You were a million miles away."

"I wish that was true," she murmured.

"Am I that hard to take?"

She frowned, disliking herself. He was so damned nice, so damned attentive, so damned understanding . . . and such a handsome boy. Yes, she thought of

him as a boy although he was twenty-five, four years older than she—but already he was going a bit soft in the chin. She knew exactly what he'd look like when he was sixty. Like his father, of course, and if he had his way he'd be living in the family home up the lane with Jayde and a brood of little Williamses by his side.

She shook her head and smiled, aware she was a little fuzzy from the cocktails. "I'm sorry. It's so beautiful out. I really think July is my favorite month."

He squeezed her hand. "We've had a lot of fun in July. The family picnics on the Fourth. Swimming at our place or mine. And remember when you burned yourself at the beach camp-out? That was in July."

Ah, such exciting memories, she thought sarcastically, hoping her smile didn't reveal her true feelings. The memory of a painful hot coal which popped up in her suit and how carefully Gary had peeled the pins from her shoulders. And then how tender and cool his hands had been, until they began to roam inside her suit and he gurgled boyishly in his throat. It was the first time they had really made love.

"The good old days," she murmured, lowering her eyes as she finished her after dinner brandy. She was feeling the alcohol, but it merely made her drowsy.

It was a chemical formula: Add four parts alcohol, four parts boredom and, presto, instant sleep.

"Gary, I hate to be a stick . . ."

His face fell, but he recovered. "I know . . . I had a day on the tennis court, and all that. I don't

suppose I could expect you to stay on the dance floor all night."

She shook her head, feeling a little sorry for him. "You can take me home, but there's no hurry. The night air feels so good."

Damn! She couldn't take back her words and he immediately snapped alert at the implied promise—promise she told herself she truly hadn't intended to make. She had only wanted to be less rude than she had sounded.

"But don't get ideas, dear boy," she said, looking directly at him. "It's nice out. I'm tired. We can drive for a bit before I hit the hay. Period."

Nevertheless, his hands fumbled with his wallet as he hurried to leave a few bills on the table and rush her outside, his hand on her elbow.

She let him drive for a half hour, not letting him stop to park, and then she'd insisted that they head for her place.

Inevitably, of course, he had to stop the car and when she put her hand on the door, he held her wrist—lightly, like a gentleman should.

"What's the matter?" he asked, his voice coming at her with a hurt tone. "Afraid to share a cigarette with an old pal?"

She felt the other hand holding the cool metal case against her arm. She relaxed and took one, letting him light it as their eyes met briefly over the flare from his lighter.

They smoked silently for a few minutes, he puffing

deeply and rapidly, she looking toward the lovely old house in the moonlight; toward the lovely porch which led inside to her bedroom where she yearned to be—alone.

Presently his cigarette arced in a red line across the grass and his fingers plucked hers away and sent it after its mate. Then his arms were around her and his lips traveled carefully across her cheek, searching for her mouth.

"Gary . . ."

"What now?" he snapped. "Afraid to let me touch you after so many years?"

"No . . . but . . ." oh, god, it was all so predictable. She knew exactly what their lines and actions would be for the next half hour, as though she held a printed script in her hands. Unless she was firm and changed the ending herself. "I'm terribly tired. I suppose you can blame the cocktails."

"I'm not going to rape you, for pete's sake," he complained, the hurt back in his voice. "You'd think I was someone you'd just met, the way you're behaving."

That was in the script, too. His hurt would begin to thaw her. She would find it necessary to respond so that her conscience wouldn't scold her for being too harsh.

She let his lips find hers for a long, cool moment, and then she drew her head back, tracing the line of his chin with her finger. "You know what I mean, you dope. How many times must we . . ."

He moved a few inches away and dug into his

pocket, producing a tiny box which he held up so the dim light from the street caught it. "You remember this?"

She nodded, nodding at him and at herself because the ring was being presented on cue. He took it out and slipped it on her finger. It was a stone of at least two carats, exquisitely cut and set in white gold.

Yet, she removed it in a flash, almost feeling it burn her finger. It was a hated symbol of the inevitability of her belonging to him, a symbol she couldn't bear to accept at the moment.

"That's not fair," she scolded softly, angry because the coldness in her heart was melting again.

"Not fair that I want to make you my wife?" he asked, his voice rising. "What could be more fair, or more honorable?"

"Put it this way," she demanded, tucking the ring into his coat pocket. "It's cruel of you to use it as a club against my conscience." Again aware of the melting as her compassion for this nice guy broke through, she ran her fingers over the back of his neck, her lips pouting at him. "Poor Gary. When are you going to throw aside the script?"

"Huh?"

"I don't suppose you ever will."

There, I've hurt him again, she scolded herself. Come, show him you care at least a little bit. Show him you're not as heartless as the refusal of a beautiful engagement ring would seem to indicate.

She leaned toward him, feeling their bodies touch

and his lips were over hers again, warmer this time. He was the injured party and it was tacitly agreed that he was entitled to collect certain damages.

But only to a point, she announced to her senses, her brain determined to keep its aloof and lofty perch unruffled.

His hands were on her arms, over her shoulders, at her throat and then dipping at the neckline of her summer print. The same little boy going for his free feel.

She felt herself curiously unmoved as his fingers squirmed inside her bra and over the cool breasts. She maintained her detachment until the intruding hands found their targets and the fingers coiled and uncoiled around her nipples.

Against her will, they began to respond, hardening and nuzzling into his palms like twin puppies eager for the caresses of the master.

That's far enough, her brain ordered, still the master. She jerked her shoulders back, pressing her breasts tightly against the dress, imprisoning his fingers so that they no longer could explore. "Really, Gary, that's all for tonight," she murmured, not certain how steadily her voice was coming through. "I've got to go inside."

Reluctantly, hurt again so that her compassion flowed anew, he withdrew his hands and slid across the seat. He got out, careful not to slam the door in the silence of the night, and came around the car, to help her out.

She took a few steps across the lawn, and then turned to him. "Thanks, Gary. It was a lovely evening."

He moved to her, his arms going very properly around her shoulders, pulling her to him. He kissed her lips and Jayde felt her breasts being crushed against his chest, the lingering hardness of her nipple stabbing at his ribs.

She had not yet recovered from his touch, she cautioned herself, but she hoped she was winning the battle.

His hands began to move. Swiftly and surely they slipped down her back, pausing only an instant at the slimness of her waist before dipping to the flaring firmness of her buttocks.

"Gary!" Her voice was sharp, a whispered note of urgency in the darkness. But he knew what he was doing. He'd been around her enough to know her most vulnerable spot.

His hands cupped her, working against the firmness, forcing her to relax and give in to his every delicate pressure.

In an instant, all of the passions which she had held in check since her thoughts in her room that afternoon gave way, like a dam of female desires breaking. She knew that they'd be following the script all the way tonight, unless . . .

One more try, girl. Don't give in.

"That's enough," her voice hissed, but her body was telling a different story, pressing in.

the hips down even as she leaned away above his chest.

He saw the gleam of triumph in his grin as he kissed her lips. The hands removed themselves after a moment, she thought she'd won the skirmish. But they came back, clutching at the hem of his shirt as he stopped and then raised it to her waist. His hands, hot and squirming now, came back to the center, kneading the warm flesh and probing the hidden places.

A hot gasp broke from her lips. "Stop!" she hissed, looking at him. "I'm not going to be mauled out here in the lawn like some common tramp." The hands continued to fire her senses and she sagged. "Garnett, damn you." Surrender swept over her and she moaned. "At least take me up to the swing," she breathed.

He reacted quickly, sweeping her up in his arms and hurrying toward the porch. He placed her carefully on the shadowed swing and began to fumble awkwardly with her clothing. Jayde aided him, aware then that it was all going according to script.

At last he was with her. Gary's breathing was ragged and his movements urgent. Jayde tried desperately to catch up to him in the race for fulfillment, digging her fingers in his back and biting hard on his lower lip, but it was useless . . . just as it always was. Gary's body stiffened and then shuddered and she was left throbbing with unsated passion and aching with unappeased frustration.

"I love you . . ." he murmured exhaustedly.

Jayde didn't answer. She wondered why she felt so bitterly disappointed. She had known what was going to happen . . . or rather, what wasn't going to happen . . . right from the start. The script never changed. Well, she was going to make it change. This was the end of all this nonsense. She was going to do whatever she had to do to make her life change.

Hunter Hood looked up from his breakfast. "That's preposterous, Jayde. What ever made you think—"

Jayde interrupted him patiently. "What's so preposterous about it, father?"

The newspaper magnate sputtered a moment. "Well, for one thing, you'd be out of your element. Secondly, it would smack of nepotism. Thirdly, you'd make a damned fool out of yourself."

Jayde leaned forward desperately. "Father, please, it's very important to me. Besides, I think I'd make a good reporter."

"It's a jungle, my dear. A veritable jungle."

Jayde smiled. "That's what I need . . . to find out if I'm capable of taking care of myself in a jungle, to find out if I have what it takes to get by on my own . . . without your help, without all your money."

"Have you talked to Gary about this?"

She sighed. "Oh, father, it's Gary and his wooden existence that I'm trying to break away from. Please."

He shook his head firmly. "Out of the question."

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He shook his head firmly. "Out of the question."

Jayde smiled secretly. She knew her father, and she knew that before the day was out he'd give up the battle and give in to her wishes, just as he always did. It had been that way ever since she was old enough to sit on his lap and twist her fingers in his steel-grey hair.

A jungle . . .

She shivered with delight.

TWO

Mark Brannon was so mad he couldn't bring himself to look at his managing editor. Instead, he sat sprawled in his chair, his long legs extended and crossed at the ankles, and stared straight ahead through the glass partition to the city room outside. "It stinks," he muttered angrily.

"I know it stinks," Ray Fox replied, running a hand over his bald head and chewing on his dead cigar. "But look at it this way . . . you know Hood and you know he's never stood for anyone being carried on the payroll unless he or she did the job. He told me it still goes . . . even with his daughter."

Mark laughed drily. "Oh, sure. I can just see me giving her the gate."

Fox nodded. "That's what he'd want you to do if she can't cut it. Give her a fair trial, just like anyone else, and then make up your mind. No red-carpet treatment, no special consideration."

Mark was about to answer when he spotted a vision in a bright orange sheath working her way through

the maze of desks out in the city room. She was a tall one, at least five-nine and her blonde hairdo added few inches. "I vote no," he murmured absently, distracted for the moment. "That is, if I have anything to say about it."

"Sure you do, but . . ."

"You've never questioned me before, Ray. So I suppose I don't want the girl. If we're really so damned impartial about this, you'll back me up. I say dump her now before she turns into big trouble."

It was the walk that got him. She ambled like a panther, a supremely confident panther, strolling through the forest deciding what to have for dinner and knowing she could have almost anything she wanted.

"And I say you're acting like a snob," Fox grumbled. "She's the rich girl looking for a start, and you're the one who's acting so damned superior. Why can you give her the break you'd give any other bright girl who walked in off the street?"

Mark had to look at him for a moment, surprised at the editor's sharp tone. "But that's the point. She *isn't* a girl in off the street. She's straight from a big house on the hill and her daddy happens to own this newspaper."

The tall broad was approaching the city desk and little guy Mark hadn't noticed before trotted around from behind her to hold out his hand to Barry Butler. Mark had to smile. Ladies' man Butler was licking his lips as his eyes feasted on the vision in orange.

"Come on, Mark," Fox challenged, his voice calm, friendly now. "Give the kid a break."

"You say she wants a reporter's beat, eh? Something rough and tough so she'll know she's not being coddled?"

"That's the picture. And she wants to start in the morning." Fox waited. "Well, what do you say?"

"Eh?"

"Damn it, Mark, you haven't listened to me for the last five minutes. What's going on out there that's got you bugged?" The managing editor grunted his way out of his chair and moved to the glass. "Gee-zuz."

"Yeah," Mark muttered. "In spades."

"Looks like she's here to see you."

"Uh-huh, and Barry is in over his head. I'd better hustle out there and keep the situation well in hand." He glanced at Fox, seeing the older man's eyes glitter with interest. "Hm, this is the first time I've seen you drool so far away from the dinner table, Ray."

The managing editor tore his eyes away from the woman and turned back to his desk, shuffling papers as though he were all business. "Mind your manners, boy. Get out of here and cool off a little. Then see me later about Jayde Hood."

"I still don't go for it, not one bit."

"I know, I know. That's why I want you to come back." He angled his head toward the city room. "That broad out there is after something. Service her and that should put you in a better mood to talk about our problem."

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mile and hiked her well-padded buttocks onto the desk top. "Just don't forget that I've got pretty sharp claws and I know how to use them."

Mark grinned. "I remember only too well." He sat back and lighted a cigarette, enjoying the sight of his frequent bedmate. Dottie was built for sex, and not too proud to admit she needed it at regular intervals. In addition, she was a hep dame who survived in a world almost entirely populated by males. She was able to pound out entertaining society copy as well as manage to have fun along the way.

She sat on the edge of the desk, her round breasts heavy beneath the silk of her blouse, her nylon-clad legs pleasantly plump as she swung them idly. "I suppose you made a date with her, you rat."

"Me? You know better than that, Dottie."

She snorted derisively. "Oh, sure."

"Jealous?"

"You bet your sweet typewriter I'm jealous," she murmured seductively, looking him straight in the eye. "It's been over a week since you warmed my bed, remember?"

Mark was about to reply to her not-too-subtle invitation when he saw Ray Fox heading in his direction. "Move it, Dottie. I'll see you later."

The well-rounded reporter sighed and slid off the desk, nodding at Fox as the managing editor passed by her. Fox gave her a stern look and then ignored her departure.

"Well? How about it, Mark?" he asked tersely.
"Jayda Hood?"

"Yes, Jayda Hood."

Mark grimaced. "For crying out loud, Ray, use your head. The city beat is rugged, even for a guy. She'll be exposed to all sorts of elements. Can you see her mixing with the hookers, the gamblers, the numbers boys, the pimps, the dope peddlers—"

"She'll just have to get used to them."

Mark cursed aloud. "Look what happened to Stein last month. One of our best boys. He got too close to the mob and ended up being arrested in some cheap hotel room on a morals rap because when he came out of the fog, there was a fourteen-year-old girl in bed with him. What do you think they'd do to a girl like Jayda Hood if she steps on their toes?"

"Calm down, Mark."

Mark tried to cool off by lighting a cigarette. "Okay, okay . . . if she really wants to get into this racket, why not start her out in the women's department? With her background, she'd be with her own kind."

"She doesn't want it that way," Fox replied. "Look, Mark, it's decided so you might as well learn to live with it. She's starting here in the morning. On general assignment. If, after a fair trial . . . and I do mean a fair trial, she doesn't work out . . . we'll tell the old man and that's that."

Mark stared at his superior. "Then it's an order?"

"It's an order."

The interoffice phone sounded and Fox took advantage of it to walk away. Mark snatched the phone up angrily. "Brannon here!"

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"Calm down, Mark."

Mark tried to cool off by lighting a cigarette. "Okay, okay . . . if she really wants to get into this racket, why not start her out in the women's department? With her background, she'd be with her own kind."

"She doesn't want it that way," Fox replied. "Look, Mark, it's decided so you might as well learn to live with it. She's starting here in the morning. On general assignment. If, after a fair trial . . . and I do mean a fair trial, she doesn't work out . . . we'll tell the old man and that's that."

Mark stared at his superior. "Then it's an order?"

"It's an order."

The interoffice phone sounded and Fox took advantage of it to walk away. Mark angrily. "Brannon here!"

A velvety voice oozed through the receiver. "Miss Brannon? This is Lois. You know, Miss Planet. I had a few minutes while the photographer sets up the lights so I thought I'd make that call you suggested. You do remember, don't you?"

Mark gazed after the departing managing editor and glared at the receiver. "Yeah, yeah, I remember. Let's get something straight right off the bat . . . no more publicity. This is it, understand? Whether we get together or not, *The news* doesn't promote beauty contest winners."

The voice remained unruffled. "Not even another lecture next month, when and if I make the finals?"

"Nope."

There was a slight pause. "Not even if I coax you?"

"You can try."

"I'd like that."

Mark shrugged, checking the clock again. "I've got some work to take care of but I should be able to break away in about fifteen minutes."

"My place or yours?"

"Neither," Mark answered, wondering why he felt he needed to be such a hard guy. "You'll have to do your coaxing on that lumpy couch you probably saw in the corner of the photo lab. I won't have much time."

"Oh."

Mark grinned. "Take it or leave it, baby."

"What about my manager and the photographer?"

"Just tell them you're waiting for me. They'll understand."

"All right."

Mark leaned back in his chair. "And baby, don't bother to take off your bathing suit. Like I said, I won't have much time." Still grinning, Mark hung up the telephone, his mood considerably improved.

THREE

The following morning, Mark was on edge as he set the wheels of the newspaper in motion. He'd drunk too heavily the previous night, partially because of his ruthless behavior with the beauty contest hopeful that afternoon, and partially because of the order he'd received from Ray Fox about Hunter Hood's precious offspring. The most aggravating part of it all was that the session with the luscious and, as he discovered in the photo lab, talented Miss Planet, had failed to take the edge off his annoyance.

For that reason, he was instantly alert to the opening of the elevator doors when Jayda Hood made her entrance into the city room. At first glance, his reaction was one of surprise and pleasure. She was a gorgeous young woman, with a proudly lifted chin and flawless features and a remarkable figure. Something struck a chord within him as he watched her body moving beneath the stylish dress. This was class, his brain told him. Real class.

And trouble.

She was coming toward him now, after asking directions from the teenage copy girl, Nancy, who looked after her with something like appraising envy in her stare. It was Jayde Hood, all right, and he knew how much trouble there was under that sleek, auburn hairdo.

He'd heard about the Hood girl, of course, especially from Ray Fox, who'd been invited to the publisher's home a few times on business. The managing editor had raved, but Mark was accustomed to hearing newspapermen sing the praises of beautiful women.

Mark had known plenty himself, but this dame was different. Class on the hoof. A face to challenge Rembrandt, a body to set a man nuts, a bearing which advertised that she couldn't be pushed around.

That's where the trouble was, for he'd promised himself he *would* push the Hood dame around—plenty. She was the spoiled brat her daddy had forced down his throat and told him to swallow and like it. He'd swallowed and now he was ready to cough her up and spit her out, ready to send her home to daddy.

But it would be tough. He hadn't counted on a queen like this, the kind of girl that makes a man want to take her in his arms and beat off the rest of the world if anybody tried to get smart.

His head was down to his work by the time she'd threaded her way to his desk, but from the corner of his eye he'd seen the men frozen in their tracks and the women, if not stopped, at least slowed to a crawl.

feel sorry for the girl. He looked at her and crooked his finger.

She was back at his desk instantly, digging into her purse to produce a pad and pencil.

"What the hell are you doing?" he snarled.

She flushed. "I'm ready to take notes."

Butler, sitting nearby, guffawed and Mark let himself smile. "Put that stuff away, girlie." He turned to his assistant. "Barry, is Fox's office empty?"

Butler looked up at Mark and then at Jayde. Biting his lips without seeming to realize it. "Yep. He checked out for the courthouse."

Mark nodded and looked up at the clock. "I'll be in there if you run into trouble."

He got up and waved to the girl, leading the way into Fox's office, closing the door. He sat down at the managing editor's desk and motioned to a chair the chair where he'd sat while Fox had been giving him the business the day before.

She sat down meekly, like a high school sophomore in the principal's office.

"Miss Hood," he began, businesslike in spite of her maddeningly attentive look, a look punctuated by those two large eyes fastened on his own. How the hell could he be expected to keep his mind where it belonged?

"Miss Hood, I don't know what you think life on a newspaper is, but it's no snap. It isn't romantic. It isn't often very exciting, it isn't all interviews with movie stars and free passes to the theater."

"I know that, and I . . ."

"It's long, hard hours, lots of dull digging for facts, sometimes danger, and always, lousy money." He placed his finger on the side of his nose. "Although I don't suppose the prospect of a thin pay envelope bothers you."

"No, it doesn't," she said stiffly. "However, if you must know, one reason I'm here is because I intend to begin supporting myself. As for the other things, I'm ready to do whatever's asked."

He dug into his shirt pocket for a cigarette and pulled one out, lighting it and flipping the match toward the wastebasket. He dragged deeply and looked at her through the smoke, his eyes slits.

Deliberately, she opened her purse and removed a cigarette case, taking out a cigarette of her own. Frowning, he fumbled for his matches again and began to lean forward, but she shook her head.

"Don't trouble yourself, Mister Brannon," she said with emphasis, making the most of his bad manners. "I told you I intend to take care of myself. In *every*-thing."

"Is that so?" he said. "Tell me how you're going to take care of yourself when I send you down to the docks to interview a longshoreman and you're wearing an outfit like that." He waved at her neckline and she instinctively put her hand to her throat. "Two or three of those birds would grab you and in less than a minute—"

Again she colored, but she kept her chin up. "I'm prepared to take my chances. Surely I'm not the first

continued, "and there are plenty of tough eggs. How can you help us in that line of work?"

"Well, I . . ."

"Where did you go to school?"

She looked down at her hands, and he did, too. They were clean and well-formed—the hands of a lady. "White Oaks College," she murmured so he could barely hear.

"White Oaks." He let the scorn show. "They teach you any *judo* there? They show you how to take notes with a pencil stub in your pocket so nobody would know? They teach you about the numbers games, the bookie joints, the call girls, the protection boys?"

The Hood chin was up again, raised high. "I intend to stick it out on *The News*, despite your efforts to frighten me away," she said. "I've asked no favors because of my father and I expect none. If I do my work I expect to be treated equally with the others. If I can't do the work, you have permission to discharge me—but *only if I can't do the work*."

Mark fumed, his fingers clenching into fists as he leaped up and turned to look out of the window, his back to her. "Get out of here," he hissed. "See Butler. Maybe he's got some obituaries for you to break in on."

He heard her heels tapping out and he turned, watching her cross the city room. Despite his frustra-

tion, his eyes ran the length of her and he knew something had to happen.

A kid in a bakery shop couldn't be within arm's reach of all that pastry for long without trying to steal a piece or two.

FOUR

In the privacy of the powder room, Dotti Jones unbuttoned and parted her silken blouse. She studied the imported brassiere for a moment before fingering the front clasp. It was expensive, but worth every cent since it set off her breasts in an attractive coned separation. At the pressure of her fingertips, the clasp sprung open and her large breasts expanded instantly, causing her to breathe a long sigh of relief.

She was proud of her breasts, despite the trouble they occasionally caused due to their terrible sensitivity. The absolute center of her passion, they reacted to almost any form of stimulation, even the subtle scraping of a blouse. Flesh to flesh contact was powerful enough to drive her to a frenzy which on occasions, actually blotted out the memory of the sexual act that followed the caressing of her breasts.

She remembered how they had betrayed her during that experimental era the previous year with Maxine Baker. The lesbian's knowing hands had driven her into a delirium, a helpless and vulnerable delirium.

Dottie glared. "Never again."

"Old fires have been known to flare anew."

Dottie shook her head, annoyed at herself for noticing how Maxine's black hair complimented her pale complexion and blood red lips. "Our fire is out," she stated flatly. "You knew at the time that it was just . . . well, an experiment."

Maxine edged closer. "Completely out, cheri? We had some good times at my apartment, remember? I'll bet I could stoke the fire again in a matter of minutes." She raised a hand as though to stroke Dottie's breasts and laughed when Dottie jumped away

"See? You're not as sure of yourself as you think."

Dottie hated the beautiful girl at that moment. "All right, so you know my weakness. But don't think you're so special. Others have taken advantage of it too."

"Like Mark Brannon."

"Yes, like Mark Brannon."

Maxine's smile grew catty. "That brings us to Jayde Hood."

Dottie smirked. "You won't get to first base with her."

Maxine shrugged. "You never know. But I wasn't thinking of myself just now. I was thinking of your boyfriend."

"Mark?"

"Well, after all, and you should excuse my choice of words . . . she is working under Mark, isn't she?"

"Don't be ridiculous," Dottie countered edgily. "He's done nothing but rub her nose in the dirt since

she came to work here. It's been three days and he's never as much as smiled at her."

The tall brunette grunted. "Who's kidding who? Mark Brannon never passed up a chance to deflower a virgin in his life . . . that is, if the lovely Miss Hood qualifies, which I rather doubt. He'll make his move when the time is right. And you know it only too well, sugar plum."

"Oh, go to hell," Dottie snapped, smoothing her blouse and leaving the powder room to the accompaniment of Maxine's amused and mocking laughter.

At her typewriter, she had difficulty concentrating on the story. She was preoccupied with what Maxine had said and the fact that most of it was true. Mark was a bastard when it came to women and Jayde Hood was definitely woman.

What dismayed Dottie most was that the girl was a smart thing who learned fast and who worked hard. She'd made some mistakes, of course, but not the same one twice. And Mark was impressed, for all his gruffness, she was sure. A beautiful young girl and a competent, smart reporter . . . it was a combination he'd never be able to resist.

Damn her! Why didn't she stay where she belonged, in high society, in that big house, in her own world? Why couldn't she be satisfied with her servants and clothes and jewelry and well-bred young men? Why did she have to come down here and spoil everything?

Dottie leaned back and looked across the city room

to where Jayde was hard at work her fingers flying over her typewriter, her tongue twisted in the corner of her mouth. Where did the girl learn to type like that?

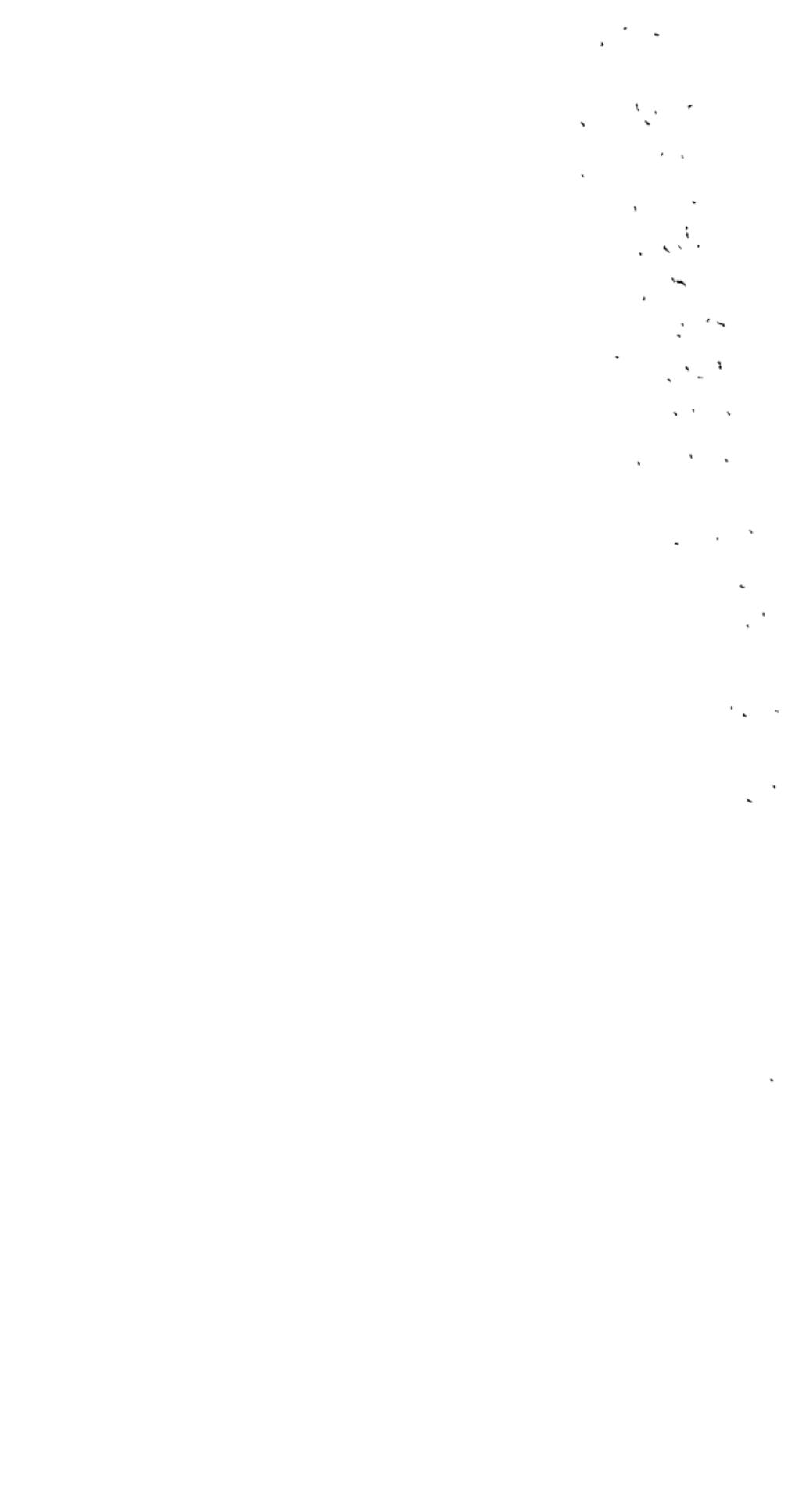
Her eyes slid over to Mark who was up on his elbows in stories, headlines, jingling names and easy boys. Even so, she watched his eyes flick to her twice in a three minute span. There it was. He was showing more interest than a hand-hatched editor should show in a cub reporter.

A squirming began in the pit of her stomach and Dottie tensed. It had been well over a week since Mark had steered her out of the office and into his apartment for a few frenzied hours of ~~unmentionable~~ sex. Over a week, and he wasn't showing ~~any sign~~ of an encore. It wasn't like him.

He had Jayde Hood on his mind.

Well, if the girl was planning to climb ~~over~~ ~~over~~ bed to keep her job, Dottie could counter ~~over~~ ~~over~~ over with a few of her own. It was ~~best~~ ~~best~~ ~~best~~ this business and the sooner Little Miss Hood ~~got~~ ~~got~~ ~~got~~ out, the better off everybody would be.

Feeling a bit better, more sure of herself, Dottie thought back to her own shaky beginning at *The News*. She'd been only twenty-three, fresh out of a small college, and green as grass except for the one thing that mattered most to her. The boys in college had seen to her education on that score. ~~damn them~~ That night after the dance in the back seat of the car, for example . . . the three of them, driving her crazy.



ing to the talkative Barry Butler tell one of his usually amusing stories.

"So . . ." a fit of laughing made Butler's face redder and he choked it off with a coughing spasm. "So, this dame comes over to the desk and says she'd like to interview the king of the numbers games, Vince Mailer."

The others broke into laughter, not so much at the story as at the way Butler performed. He did a credible imitation of Jayde Hood's hip-twitching walk and he spoke with a falsetto voice.

"'Look, Miss Hood,' I said, keeping a straight face, naturally." He grinned around the circle. "Let's face it, she's still the boss's favorite daughter."

Mark set down his whisky and shook his head. "Damn it, I told you, Barry. She's getting no special privileges. She's to be treated like anyone else."

Butler held up his hands. "That's just what I'm doing, Mark, but I'm sure as the devil not going to tee off on the Hood family when it isn't absolutely necessary." This time he leered at the crowd. "Besides, she's the best-stacked number to pass through our portals in many a day. If I can get next to her by helping to smooth over her rough spots, I'll be happy to oblige."

"That's what I like about you," Mark snapped, not too unkindly. "Always keeping the old nose to the grindstone."

"Aw, come on, boss." Butler spread his hands eloquently. "It isn't every day a cupcake like her pops out of the breadbox. I'm only human, man."

Barry Butler, as usual, overheard and chuckled but Mark ignored him. "I don't recall signing an exclusive contract with you, baby."

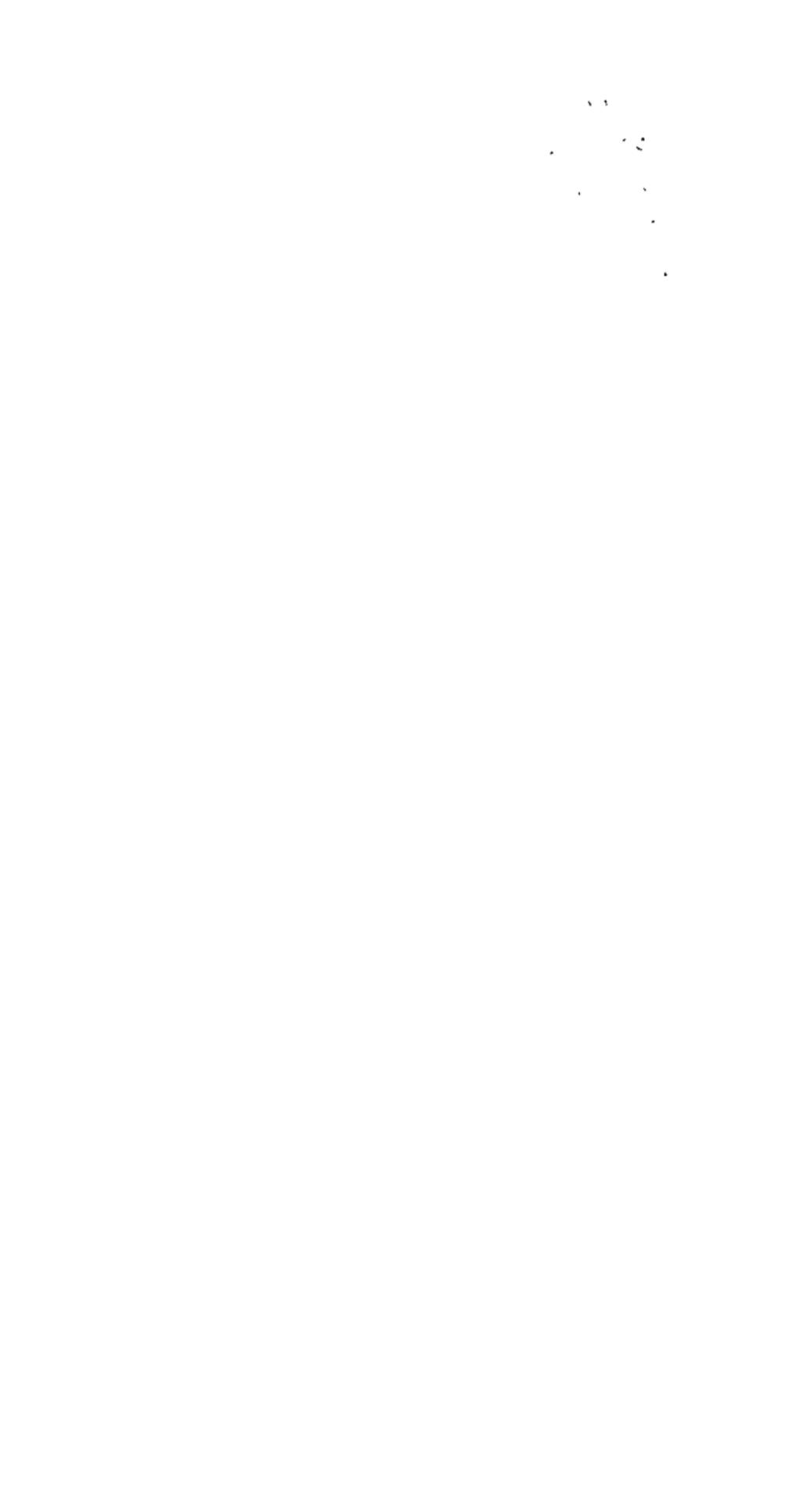
Dottie wasn't too drunk to catch the sharpness of his tone and her eyes narrowed in a show of self-annoyance. "Don't take everything I say too seriously," she muttered, turning on his lap to face the others. "Who's going to buy me a drink?" she asked with false gaiety.

Still a bit resentful, Mark shifted and lifted her weight from his lap. "Excuse me a minute, gang." He slid out and rose to his feet, pausing for a moment to order another round from the waitress. "Once again and put them on my tab." He grinned as the gang cheered the gesture and walked toward the rest room.

He hadn't meant to put Dottie down so sharply in front of the others, but she'd asked for it with her show of possessiveness. The one thing he liked about her most was that, in the past, she always respected their no-strings-attached relationship. If he was in the mood, she was ready; if she had a bad case of the hots, he found the time to help her out. It had always been that simple, but lately, during the past week, she'd started acting as though he owed her some sort of fidelity.

Dismissing the matter from his mind, aware that he was drinking too much again, he headed back toward the booth.

The crowd had thinned out considerably and Dottie was still trying to undo the damage done by her



something very special . . . but what? "Mark," she began, rubbing her breast against his arm, "are you still mad at me?"

"Why should I be mad?"

"Because I acted like a jealous cat and I had no right."

He smiled. "Okay, now I forgive you. Have another drink."

Dottie hesitated. "I don't want another drink. I want you. I want you to come home with me and . . ." she stopped, trying frantically to come up with the needed gimmick. "And play a new game with me," she concluded quickly.

Mark frowned. "What kind of game?"

Dottie stalled. "You'll like it, I promise you."

"What kind of game?"

It came to her all at once and she breathed a sigh of relief as she snuggled closer. "Statue."

"Come again?"

"Statue. And it's more than a game . . . it's a challenge."

Mark shook his head impatiently. "You're not getting through to me, baby. C'mon, have another drink."

Dottie was having trouble sitting still, her inner excitement quickening as her mind raced ahead to her apartment. "I'll explain it to you. I make like a statue, see? I stand perfectly still and you . . . well, do anything you want to do to me."

"Where's the challenge come in?"



hugged her hips and accented the fine curves of her buttocks. The blouse, cut tightly, yielded grudgingly to the voluptuousness of her breasts.

She moistened her lips. "Are you ready?"

"This is crazy," he mumbled.

"You promised."

"All right, all right."

Dottie could hardly keep from shivering with delight as he rose to his feet, somewhat unsteadily, and approached her. "Now you remember the rules, don't you?" she asked breathlessly. "No tickling, no pinching . . . and above all, no touching my breasts. That wouldn't be fair. Anything else, but you can't take off my bra."

"Sure. Sure."

Dottie struck a pose, her shoulders back and her arms braced at her sides. She lifted her chin and fixed her eyes on a picture across the room. "It's ten-thirty exactly. You have until eleven. If I don't melt by then, I win the bet."

"You don't stand a ghost of a chance," Mark chuckled, obviously warming to the challenge as he circled her slowly.

Dottie waited, her knees quivering. She knew she didn't stand any chance at all of winning, but she didn't care. The important thing was that she ~~didn't~~ lose too quickly, too obviously. Another ~~thought~~ coursed through her as Mark stopped ~~directly~~ in front of her and ran his eyes up the length of her body. He smiled but remained rigid.

Mark began to unbutton her blouse. ~~She~~ ~~smiled~~

and gritted her teeth as he parted and tugged it free of her skirt, tossing it aside to the floor. He moved slightly to the side to open the skirt zipper and she felt her nerves screaming as it slid down her legs to lay in a circle at her feet. Perspiration broke out on her forehead and lip as he slowly inched the panties down her thighs.

"Easiest damn bet I ever made," he whispered in her ear, his lips fluttering with the sound. Another tingle ran through her as the panties fell at her feet. Only her bra—the black one with the pink bow at the center—remained, and that was off limits.

Mark placed a forefinger at the nape of her neck and began to trace a line down her back. The tingling spread through her body as the finger traveled between her shoulders, down the small of her back and into her rounded buttocks. Their lazy softness caused her to live and, against her will, she jerked and flinched.

He'd noticed. She heard him chuckle.

From behind her, he placed a finger on the side of each knee and traced two lines up her flanks, over the rounding of her hips to her waist. Moving in front of her, he peered at her face. "Getting warm, baby," he asked mockingly.

She said nothing.

Again he placed a finger on each hip and then drew two lines, coming together at the exact point of her navel. Here the fingers were removed to be replaced by a hand—a hand which lay softly and easily against her skin, tucked against the curve of her back.

Almost imperceptibly, the hand began to move, first in tiny circles. Despite her will, her body shuddered as she sucked in air and then gasped from the sheer delight of his touch as the heat spread through her abdomen. It radiated out from her midsection like the warmth of a heat lamp, entering her pores, electrifying her nerves, setting her innermost senses to screaming for more.

A small series of moans escaped from her lips and he smiled in triumph, but she was unable to stop herself. He'd taken control.

The hand was making larger circles, still gentle and still confined to the pit of her stomach. But the circles continued, his hand stroking with a rhythm which reminded Dottie of only one thing.

Her hands clenched into fists as she stiffened her elbows, fighting to keep them at her sides. As ~~he~~ stroked on . . . that maddening hand generating passion like an electric motor makes current . . . her knees began to bend and, ever so slowly, to sway from side to side.

The hand continued its circular path, like a ~~hot sun~~ orbiting the center of her universe. Its curve widened, dipping low and then rising almost to her throbbing brassiere.

It was that lazy rhythm which was breaking her down, she knew. His hand was like a sensual perpetual motion machine, a machine which had only to continue operating to eventually win.

It was winning right now, her senses told her. Shud-

ders rocked her body again and again and, deeply in the pit of her stomach, she could feel the churning juices rising. It would be only a matter of time before they drowned her and she would lose all memory of what was happening.

"Oh, Mark, honey," she breathed weakly, swaying and twitching. "You're driving me crazy."

"Give up?"

He steeled herself, aware that only six or seven minutes had elapsed since the start of the game. "No, no, damn you."

He laughed and caressed her intimately, making her es buckle sharply and a groan burst forth from her throat. Then, as though aware of the effect, he leaned forward to blow warm breath down into the depths of her pulsing breasts.

Lottie shuddered and crumpled. Unable to control the convulsive tremors that shook her nearly, she embraced his strong legs and shouted. "You win . . . you win . . . oh, Mark, I'm . . . on fire . . . help me . . ."

"We made a bet, remember?"

He lifted her head to look up at him. "I'm . . . I'm . . . Whatever you want, but . . . touch me." Without waiting for his answer, he unclasped the clasp of the black bra and flung it to the floor. She closed her eyes against the intense heat as she leaned back, her palms behind her head, her heavy breasts offered up to his caressing. "Please, Mark," she gasped. "Please . . ." A sob broke from her lips as his hands massaged

with the spiking nipples. A flood of exquisite pleasure swept through her as he fondled her teasingly and yet satisfyingly. She felt weak and dizzy and yet on fire.

She could feel herself losing contact with reality. And the warm, velvety darkness was beginning to envelop her, just as it had so often in the past when someone took special pains in exploiting her terrible weakness. Quickly, before she lost complete control before she gave way to purely animal instincts and passions, she spoke the words she'd been saving all night.

"Tell me I'm the best you've ever had, Mark. Tell me."

She could sense that he was ridding himself of his clothes even though her eyes were closed and his hands never left her quivering flesh for more than brief second or two. "You're great," he mumbled absentmindedly.

"Tell me I'm all the woman you need, Mark."

"Sure, sure."

"Tell me I'm better than her."

"Her?"

Dottie shivered ecstatically as she felt the warmth of his naked body near her. "Jayda Hood . . ." she whispered weakly.

"You talk too much."

"Say it, Mark. Say it."

"Okay, you're better than her. You're the best. Satisfied?"

Dottie went limp and smiled happily. "Now . . ."

what you want me to do. Whatever you want darling. Whatever you say. Anything. Anything at all."

Mark told her and Dottie didn't hesitate paying off the bet.

FIVE

Maxine Baker presented a lovely sight as she sat at her desk in the library of *The News*, her long legs neatly tucked to one side of her chair. The tall brunette glanced up at a youthful copyboy who passed in the outer corridor and smiled prettily in response to his wink. When he disappeared from sight, Maxine chuckled amusedly and finished with the file folder of dead clippings.

She rose and walked gracefully into the rows of storage files to return the folder to its resting place among the other yellowed newspaper clippings and microfilmed editorials. The boy's name was Sammy or Sonny or something like that, she recalled. Young, but rather attractive . . . for a man. It amused her that she was able to fool them so completely, all of them, until they'd been around *The News* long enough to discover the truth of her sexual tastes.

Actually, considering her looks and shape and the ultra-feminine clothing she wore, it wasn't surprising that they never guessed at the truth. She didn't look

like a lesbian. She'd never wanted to appear one. She preferred lacy underthings and delicate ruffles as much as any woman. And, at times, her appearance served to lure other females who otherwise would have fled if she were at all mannish.

Once their defenses were down and she began to put her talent to work . . . well, more often than not, they were under her spell before they fully realized what was happening. Like the delightful new telephone operator down at the switchboard, Maxine thought, recalling how she'd played it straight for two weeks before she got the girl up to her apartment. After several strong drinks and two hours of intimate girl-talk and mood music playing on the stereo, Maxine had decided it was time. The girl thought it was all some kind of a game at first, the little fool. Giggle and squealing and squirming all over the couch as Maxine coaxed her into an experimental game. Then, with one forceful and sensual kiss, together with a few artful caresses, it ceased being a game and the girl's giggles became groans. Later, she cried and acted as though she'd been raped, but Maxine couldn't have cared less at that point.

Returning to her desk, Maxine regretted her indifference, since it evidently prompted the girl to quit her job and thereby avoid another encounter. Perhaps she should have cultivated the sweet little thing and attempted to turn it into a steady affair? Oh, well, no use crying over spilt milk. But at the same time, it did leave her sort of high and dry as far as feminine, truly feminine, companionship was concerned. There

was always Claudia, but Claudia could hardly offer the same freshness and prettiness and satisfaction of a new bit of fluff.

How many bits of fluff had there been?

She'd lost count.

Helen had been the first, of course. It seemed centuries ago.

Maxine was fourteen when she went to live with her cousin, Helen, and her brute of a husband, Stan. Even at that early age, she was tall and beautiful and a target for male eyes. Within a year's time, Stan claimed her virginity, hurting her terribly as he forced himself upon her. He threatened to kill her if she told Helen, and Maxine knew he was mean enough to do it. It happened again and again, whenever he could corner her alone in the house, and Maxine came to dread the sight of the male body and the brutal pain it could unleash. And so, at the age where other girls became boy-crazy, she avoided any and all contact with them and stayed as close to Helen as possible.

Then, one rainy night, it happened.

Stan was out of town and the thunder and lightning was awesome. Helen suggested they sleep together and Maxine was delighted. In the cozy warmth of the great double bed, they talked and without intending to do so, Maxine blurted out the truth of her hatred for Helen's husband. Instead of becoming angry, Helen sympathized and comforted her as the tears rolled down Maxine's face. The soft hands felt so warm and wonderful. The delicate perfume was inten-

inating. The weighty pressure of Helen's breasts was maddening.

It happened.

Helen allowed it to happen.

From that night on, Maxine was happy. She had found herself. She lived for the moments when she could take Helen's shapely body in her arms and feast upon its delights. It was inevitable that Stan would discover them together and when he did, Helen had all she could do to keep him from murdering Maxine on the spot.

Somehow, in the years that followed, Maxine matured into a strong, dominant, self-sufficient woman. There were other girls, some older, some younger, all willing to let her assume the man's role in their relationship. None of them ever meant anything more to her than the pleasure they could provide her, and she sometimes wondered if she was capable of ever loving anyone again after having loved Helen so completely.

Helen.

She could still remember that soft, white body . . . the way it writhed . . . the way it would arch and then convulse and then quiver.

Maxine blinked her eyes, bringing herself back to reality, aware that her thoughts were creating an inner restlessness. She rose from her desk, feeling the need for movement, and walked to the door. She gazed out at the bustling city room, hunger lurking in her eyes as she scanned the area. They came to an abrupt stop when they focused on Jayda Hood.

God, but she's a delectable creature!

And at the moment, a forlorn one. The girl was idly pecking at her typewriter, apparently depressed as dozens of employees went by without as much as a nod of recognition. Mark Brannon was paying absolutely no attention to her whatsoever. Yes, the girl was lonely . . . in need of a friend . . .

Maxine smiled, fussed with her hair, and tapped on the glass to catch Jayda's attention. When the owner's daughter looked up, Maxine crooked her finger and smiled invitingly. Jayda frowned but smiled back, as though she couldn't believe the invitation was intended for her. Maxine nodded and wiggled the finger again.

She left the doorway, returning to her desk where she busily shuffled clippings again, making herself appear deep at work. She refused to look up, refused to acknowledge her suddenly pounding heart.

Would the girl get the message? Would she respond or had she already been poisoned against her?

Keep cool, Maxine honey. Don't be obvious. Don't get grabby. Don't frighten the tender dove away by moving too swiftly or too clumsily.

"Hello?"

The beautiful one-word question broke over Maxine's ears. She raised her eyes slowly.

"Did you want to see me?" Jayde smiled shyly.

My, she is uncertain of herself, Maxine realized. She smiled slowly, hoping her look was one of sympathy and sisterly kindness. "I've seen people who looked as though they needed a friend before, and you seem to fill the bill perfectly. My name's Maxine

Baker, and one of my jobs is to be a good listener all the new birds in the nest."

Jayde's smile showed more confidence. "You what I've been needing, all right. You don't know how it is out there hour after hour with no one talking to me."

"I know exactly what it's like, my dear, and I know that you're Jayde Hood and that Mark Brannon and his gang have been bouncing you around like a ham ball."

Jayde nodded, biting her lip.

Maxine got up and held out her hand. "Come with me."

Jayde took it and followed the larger woman back into the stacks without hesitation.

In a deep corner of the large room, hidden from the front by high rows of newspaper files, Maxine dug a heavy dictionary from its place and, from behind it, she drew out a pint bottle of good scotch and two tiny glasses. "Mother Baker's elixir. Guaranteed to thicken the blood, stimulate the glands and, generally, to make lonely girls feel better."

Jayde's tinkling laughter rippled over Maxine like a breath of heady perfume and her eyes glittered briefly as she stared into the younger girl's face. Then she busied herself with the bottle, pouring out a shot for each of them. They raised the glasses in a silent toast, and tossed them off. Maxine refilled them and set the bottle aside.

"It isn't easy, is it, honey?"

Jayde shook her head, her eyes on her hands. "But I

do so want to make good." Her lip quivered. "If I don't I'll be right back where I was . . . feeling useless and living off my father."

"Stand up straight." Maxine set down her glass and took away Jayde's, easing her against a bookcase. Her hands tingled as she squared away the girl's shoulders. "Seems to me Mark should be pleased with you. It isn't often such a flower falls at his feet."

Jayde blushed, probably more from embarrassment than anger. "I didn't fall at his feet."

Maxine nodded knowingly, chucking her under the chin, unable to keep her hands away from that lovely skin. "But you'd like to, if you were sure he'd stoop to pick you up."

Jayde reached for her glass and drained it. "He certainly hasn't given any indication he plans . . ."

"Of course not, precious, and he may not for a long time, if ever." Maxine placed a hand against Jayde's cheek, feeling it grow warmer from the scotch. "Meanwhile, what will you do?"

Jayde wrinkled her nose. "Do?"

"Every girl needs love, companionship, someone who cares—" Was she pushing too hard, moving too quickly? She hoped not, but she was no longer controlled by reason.

Jayde sighed. "It's good of you to offer to be a friend, Maxine. You're the first person who's treated me decently in a week."

Impulsively, yet maintaining some restraint, Maxine embraced the shorter girl in a show of affection. "You poor darling," she cooed. "I know how rough it's

Baker, and one of my jobs is to be a good listener for all the new birds in the nest."

Jayde's smile showed more confidence. "You're what I've been needing, all right. You don't know how it is out there hour after hour with no one talking to me."

"I know exactly what it's like, my dear, and I know that you're Jayde Hood and that Mark Brannon and his gang have been bouncing you around like a hand-ball."

Jayde nodded, biting her lip.

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been for you." She stepped back, holding Jayda's arms, allowing her gaze to flicker over the girl's lovely figure. "You just let Maxine take care of you from now on. Believe me, it will be my pleasure. You're so pretty . . . like a cute little doll."

Jayda flushed, the pinkness ranging from her throat deep into the bodice of her V-necked dress. "Thank you."

"Am I embarrassing you?"

"No, of course not," the girl murmured.

"Then why are you blushing so?"

Jayda frowned. "I'm not blushing."

Maxine smiled and lifted her fingertip to the exposed tops of the firm young breasts. "Yes, you are. See?"

Jayda's look was startled.

Maxine let her other fingertips make contact. "You even feel warm . . . very warm . . ."

Jayda moved out from under the subtle caress, the blush having reached her cheeks at this point. "I think I'd better get back to my desk, Maxine. Mister Bran-
non might be looking for me."

"One more minute, please," Maxine whispered, moving close again and letting her hands slide up Jayda's arms. "You do promise to come to me whenever you get depressed, don't you? We are friends, aren't we? Good friends?"

Jayda nodded confusedly. "Yes . . . yes, of course . . ."

Maxine smiled sweetly and drew the girl close for another sisterly embrace, but the feel of the pliant

body against her own proved too much. Without willing it, Maxine brushed her lips against the girl's ear and allowed her hands to slide down Jayda's back to the bold curve of her luscious buttocks.

Jayda stiffened as though jolted by electricity. Her mouth opened and a gasp escaped her lips and her knees seemed to buckle. "Don't!" she cried frantically, pulling away, her cheeks flaming red and her eyes showing a definite fear. "Please!"

Before Maxine could say something to smooth the ruffled feathers, Jayda turned and hurried out of sight. Maxine cursed and walked after her, annoyed with herself for having moved so boldly. By the time she reached her desk, she could see Jayda in the outer office, busily engaged at her typewriter. The cheeks were still flushed and it appeared from the movements of her delightful breasts beneath the dress, that she was breathing raggedly.

Maxine smiled slowly, reliving the moment when her fingers had slid softly over the firm curves of the girl's buttocks. So that was it! It wasn't awareness of Maxine's lesbian intentions, after all. The girl had a weakness, a very definite weakness. It was amusing. Mark Brannon's two girl friends . . . Jayda Hood, and her ultra-sensitive rear . . . and Dottie Jones, with her high-frequency breasts. Very amusing.

And interesting.

Maxine picked up the telephone, got an outside line, and dialed a familiar number. "Hello? Claudia? This is Maxine. Look, I've got to see you tonight. Don't say no, I'm desperate. Tonight."

SIX

Ray Fox was talking and Mark Brannor didn't like what his superior was saying. "The old man thinks his daughter is getting the cold treatment down here and he doesn't like it. He's read some of her stuff and he thinks she's got a flair for this business. As a matter of fact, I agree with him."

Mark sighed. "It's my job to handle the reporter and if I want to run her over the obstacle course for a few months, that's the way it's going to be."

The balding managing editor chewed his unlit cigarette annoyed as he eyed Mark. "You can't handle her the way you'd handle some pro we've lured from another paper, Mark. She's too young, too inexperienced. A little tender care might give her some needed confidence. Hell, we might save a potentially great reporter from becoming a dropout."

Mark snorted. "Potentially great reporter! If such an unlikely possibility ever came to pass you know what would happen? The same thing that happens

all newspaperwomen. She'd get hooked and wind up in some guy's white cottage doing the home cooking bit. That's why I don't like dames around in the first place."

Fox shook his head, fighting back a smile. "Mark Brannon," he muttered. "The last of the fire-eating city editors."

Mark whirled on him. "Let's cut it short, huh? Explain the tender care angle."

Fox's eyes wavered again. "Hood wants you to take her out and show her the sights."

"What?" Mark stared, eyes wide.

"Hit the high spots of the first class beats around town. Let her see how a pro gets the news. Give her a chance to operate under a watchful eye so she won't get into trouble."

"Geezus . . ."

"That'll be all, Mark." Fox buried his head in a mass of paperwork. The conference was ended.

He paced the length of the corridor, his long strides eating up the distance between the various departments. Behind him, he heard the rapid tapping of a woman's heels and her rapid breathing.

"Traffic court," he muttered, waving his arm at a pair of doors. "There's where the drunk drivers and the fatal accident cases are heard."

Farther along he waved again. "Municipal court. Local cases below the felony level."

Still farther. "Superior court, Department One. The other departments are upstairs. They take care

the felonies; everything from breaking and entering to murder, plus a bunch of civil stuff."

At the end of the hall he turned and waited while Jayde caught up with a rush. As he stood, she scribbled in a notebook, her small hand flashing across the tiny pages, her tongue tucked into the corner of her pretty red mouth. Mark caught his eyes refusing to leave that mouth and he made himself turn his back.

At last she was through taking notes and he heard a quiet murmur. "That's fine. Thank you, Mister Brannan."

He turned to her, seeing her eyes raised to his, head in thrust forward as though she were fighting not to be afraid. She was a nervy little wench. She'd endured his badgering and his blistering pace for almost three hours without a whimper.

"Any more questions?"

She nodded. "If we can sit down some place to ink it, will you let me buy you a cup of coffee?"

He refused to smile. "Okay, but everybody in the office calls me Mark. Forget that Mister Brannan alarky."

He hustled her across the street to the Courthouse cafe and they slid into a booth in the rear where, he hoped, they wouldn't be seen by any prowling reporters. That's all he would need: to be spotted with the publisher's daughter. Then the lid would be off the gossips.

She studied her cup while she slowly swirled her spoon in the coffee, a look of concentration on her face. She was slightly flushed from their race from

office to office through the downtown area and a stray hair or two was out of place. Otherwise, she looked like a million. She had on a tan skirt and a sleeveless cotton blouse as defense against the heat. All in all, a cool number. Her class showed, he had to admit. But he wouldn't admit it to her.

He immediately thought of the custodian of the library gates. "You mean Maxine Baker?"

If she detected anything in his tone, she didn't let on. "Her office has helpful and interesting things to work on."

"I'll bet."

"I've read about the racket exposes the *News* has carried. Fascinating, really, except that you've never had them covered from the woman's angle."

"What the hell do you mean, 'the woman's angle?'" he snapped, letting annoyance replace that funny feeling in his gut. "The games those lovely fellows play won't be found at any cotillion. They play for keeps. And the loser winds up in the bay."

She blushed easily as hell. "I wish you wouldn't talk so roughly," she murmured, studying her hands. "You don't need to impress me with your fire-breathing."

Again he snorted. "Me impress you? Why the hell should I want to do that? It strikes me that you're assuming an important role for yourself in the way I behave."

She was frightened, he could see, but she smiled. "Don't tell me you act this way all the time. No one could survive in society unless he dropped that heavy a chip from his shoulder from time to time."

"It comes off, all right, just like a necktie, when I'm among my friends."

She stiffened, almost as though he'd slapped her. "You enjoy hurting me, don't you?"

He leaned forward, abruptly realizing he was mak-

ing a mistake. There was danger of drowning in those eyes, but he was sore enough to fight it off. "Listen, baby, I didn't ask you to come to the *News*. I didn't want you and I'll be pleased as punch when you're gone. If you're hurt when you find out you're no buddy of mine, that's tough." He shook his head. "I've been right about you society dames all my life. Everyplace you go you assume the peasants are going to fall all over themselves for a glance. After only seven days in that office you assume you're my equal. Right now you're getting close as hell to becoming a bit too chummy with your boss."

He had to admire her courage. She took it like a champion, rolling with the punch and bouncing off the ropes. "Chummy?" she asked, her voice provocative. "I don't think I quite understand."

"You sure as hell do. Because you're a beautiful woman you assume you can get away with things, that your poor slob of a boss stops breathing whenever you waltz by his desk."

Now she looked completely like a satisfied cat. "I detect a compliment there some place. Oh, yes, you said I was beautiful. Thank you." She stopped smiling. "You see, even we idle rich appreciate an occasional bone thrown our way. Our flesh and our psyches bruise as easily as anyone else's."

"I doubt that."

"That our psyches are vulnerable?"

"That you *have* a psyche."

She thumped her small fist on the table, making the

cups rattle in their saucers. "How can you think like
ch an oaf? Honestly, you're the world's biggest
ob. If I were a girl you'd never heard of, you'd be
eating me like a human being, telling me when I did
mething right—and probably including me in your
ozy group when you hold court after hours at the
eadline Room."

He leveled his forefinger at her chin, again dis-
acted by the face. But he snapped, "You said the
agic words, lady. You're *not* a girl I've never heard
f. You're the publisher's daughter and you came
rough the front door to get your job, instead of
sing the service entrance like any other woman
ould have to do."

"I'll admit I . . ." she was losing ground, and he
ad to press hard.

"No. You worked through your father and he came
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n until you're fed up with the mess you've made for
ourself and everyone else?"

Her face was beginning to crumple. "You have a
ight to fire me whenever you please."

"Sure. You're absolutely right. The trouble is I'm a
areer man in this racket and the *News* is my baby.
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"Sure. You're absolutely right. The trouble is I'm a career man in this racket and the *News* is my baby. I'm going to live with this newspaper for the next thirty years. That sounds like a long time, doesn't it? But it still isn't long enough for your father ever to forget that I canned his daughter, embarrassed the hell

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out of him and sliced up the image of Hood invincibly. "Dad wouldn't be that unfair," she murmured. Those big dark eyes beginning to fill with tears. "Oh, no. When the time comes to fill a vacancy higher up, who's he going to pick? Someone who thinks the way he does, or a man who disagreed with him about the newspaper process of his kidwifing. She turned away, her shoulders shaking, her hand to her face. Something cried out for him to hurry to you? It's either all black or white." "You?" She finally looked up, her face reasonably composed. "You don't leave any room for shadings, do you?" He either all black or white. "Correct," he muttered. She rummaged in her purse and produced a handkerchief, wiping her nose. "Please. Take me out of here before everyone thinks you've been beating me." "That suits me perfectly." He got up, pulled a bill from his pocket and dropped it on the table. Then he whirled and headed for the door, leaving her to catch up with him at his car.

He looked down at her, noticing that their stop in the cafe hadn't helped her beat the heat. Her forehead was shining and her sleeveless blouse clung to damp spots on her body. She'd about had her lesson for the day, mentally and physic

"Yes. Admit it. You feel it as much as me. Right
"Not me, then."

she couldn't control it. "There have been too many
someones in my life, none of them any good."

Her head shook slowly from side to side, as though
someone who can tell you the things you want to
something still frightening desperately. "Go find yourself
heart."

"It's because I've been a bastard," he continued,
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grappled at the edge of the seat as she held her arms
rigid. He could hear her breathing through her
mouth.

He lowered his glance to her pale throat, to her
eyes held him.

"I know." Her voice was just above a whisper as
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"We'd be making a big mistake," he heard himself
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He realized why she seemed warmer than he back
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He lowered his glance to her pale throat, to her breasts which heaved unnaturally, to her hands which gripped at the edge of the seat as she held her arms rigid. He could hear her breathing through her mouth.

"It's because I've been a bastard," he continued, something still fighting desperately. "Go find yourself someone who can tell you the things you want to hear."

Her head shook slowly from side to side, as though she couldn't control it. "There have been too many someones in my life, none of them any good."

"Not me, then."

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They were moving, seated far apart from each
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 "A motel," he said thickly. "A place where they
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"He's away, Mark."

"Servants."

"The house is empty today."

"This is crazy."

"Hurry, Mark."

"Look, kid, I—"

The warm hand clutched his wrist again. "I'm not
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"It's because I've been a bastard," he continued, something still clutching desperately. "Go find yourself somewhere in my life, none of them any good."

"Not me, then."

Her head shook slowly from side to side, as though it couldn't control it. "There have been too many someones in my life. You feel it as much as me. Right now."

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"Hurry, Mark."

"Look, kid, I—"

The warm hand clutched his wrist again. "I'm not that much of a child, Mark. I know what . . .

believe me. And, if it will make you feel less guilty . . . I'm not a virgin."

He winced and abruptly wrenched the wheel, sending the car squealing around the corner. He set his foot down hard on the accelerator as he straightened out. "Okay, you asked for it."

SEVEN

Mark's terrible urgency had abated by the time he turned in through the stone pillars and steered up the wide driveway to the front of the Hood Mansion. He stopped and cut the motor and sat back, his ears ringing in the sudden silence, his palms still wet with nervous perspiration.

Jayda was equally as silent and equally as tense as she sat apart from him in the front seat. "Mark?" she asked suddenly, her voice strangely hoarse.

He shook his head, unable to look at her. "It's no good, kid. I'd be breaking too many rules. Let's forget it."

"No."

He looked at her and saw the burning in her eyes, the sensual flush of her throat, the heaving of her young breasts. He felt walls closing in on him and he fought against them. "Get out."

She gripped his hand and clutched it to her breast. "Stop fighting, Mark. Can't you feel it? Can't you feel the thing that's flaming inside me?"

He could. Her cotton blouse was now warm and wet and, where she pressed his palm into her bosom, it was almost hot. He could feel her body heat—almost an animal heat—radiating up through the dampness to his own flesh. It seemed to cry out for relief.

In a single convulsive movement, a movement neither consciously performed, their bodies swung together and Mark's lips were fastened on hers, pressing her head back. Her mouth was on fire, too, her lips hungrily rippling under his, her jaws working slightly as though she wished she could eat her way into his throat.

She did the next best thing. A tiny soft point touched Mark's lip—first one, then the other. It paused, then went on to touch his teeth, seeming to count them off. Then its firm warmth pressed against them, forcing them to separate so it could get inside where it felt it had a right to be. Jayde's tongue explored his mouth deeply, completely breaking down any remaining resistance.

He freed one hand from her waist and gripped her short hair, lifting his face and, at the same time, forcing her head still farther back so that at last their mouths became two again.

She opened her eyes, looking up at him. "Oh, sweet heaven, you feel it as much as I."

Before he could answer, she was pressing herself to him again, and he felt his elbow hit the steering wheel. He planted his feet on the floorboard, seeking the leverage he needed to respond to her passion.

Another long kiss, this one to the music of some-

thing gurgling in her throat, a thing which would grow to match her increasing passion, he knew.

It was her turn to pull away, and she did so with a fury, her face contorted. "Not like this, Mark." She leaped away, clawing at the door handle. "Come on, follow me."

She sprang out and he did too, hurrying around the car, racing after her flying figure. They dashed under the thick trees toward the porch, the dappled sun leaking through to them. Her slim body flew, as passion set fire to her legs and she'd reached the door and opened it before he caught her.

In the doorway they became one again, their arms fastened about one another's bodies, their breathing harsh and labored as their mouths nuzzled each other's lips, cheeks, eyes, necks, throats.

She pushed against him and they half-fell inside as she deftly reached back and hooked the door closed. It was shadowy and cool in the entry hall and she urged him, their bodies still united, into the living room, a place Mark couldn't remember seeing until much later.

At last she stepped back, struggling for air, her body heaving with passion. "I'm on fire, Mark!" she murmured. "Please, take me."

His arms circled her shoulder and she sagged back against it, the rigidity leaving her body as she fought to regain some of her furiously spent energy. Her dress was still damp with perspiration and her breasts heaved before his eyes. He reached into the back of her neckline, down the firm skin between her shoul-

der blades, and released the clasp of her brassiere. He removed his hand and allowed it to work into the front of her bodice, where it was immediately cramped for space.

Cooperatively, she hunched her shoulders forward so that the dress sagged, giving him room to maneuver. His fingers explored the hot, wet valley which deepened as he went farther. On either side of his hand he could feel her breasts, beating, seemingly, with hearts of their own.

He jerked out his hand and caught her shoulder straps with his thumbs. The spaghetti-thin material parted with two sharp pops. Working swiftly, while he still leaned against his arm, offering herself so he could do as he pleased, he worked the dress over her welling mounds and below their ruby red tips, which throbbed and danced as their bullet hardness was at last freed.

His free palm covered one of their ends. The gurgling sound returned to her throat, gradually increasing until she sighed a series of soft moans. "Mark, Mark, Mark . . ."

Her breasts were alive. His hand worked with one as the other throbbed even more, apparently impatiently jealous at the attention its twin was receiving, impatient to have its own readiness appreciated.

Mark solved the problem. While one breast nuzzled into his hand like an eager rabbit burrowing for protection and comfort, he lowered his head and kissed the other. Her body gave a lurch and, like the tip of a baby's bottle, it popped into his mouth.

"Now, now, now, Mark! Please!"

In an instant he'd stripped away her ruined dress, snapped off her panties and half carried, half dragged her to a huge couch.

She moaned as he stood apart from her, stripping himself of his clothing. She was flawlessly beautiful and sinfully wanton in her writhing nakedness and he stared at her as his fingers tore at his trousers. She was unable to lie still, her hips undulating, her nails clawing at the soft couch cushions, her head tossing from side to side.

He stared down at her and felt fear. She was too beautiful. Too perfect. He sensed that the moment he entered her arms, he'd be there forever, no longer his own master, no longer able to live the life he'd created for himself. He'd be hooked. He'd have to live her life, give up his career, surrender his freedom.

She moaned, her body squirming, her flesh glowing. "Hurry, my darling . . ." she grated, eyes tightly closed a grimace of impatience marring her prettiness. "Oh, Mark, darling, please hurry."

He couldn't think clearly. His vision blurred. Desire welled up within him and he gave way to it. "Damn you . . ." he whispered fiercely as he fell atop her.

She cried out at the savagery of his passion but her hands clutched and goaded him wantonly. A groan ripped from her parted lips as he gave vent to his nameless and senseless anger. Lightning exploded in his brain as they became one.

"No!" he shouted thickly, trying to pull away.

as though about to explode, and he knew that despite his treatment, she was on the brink of fulfillment.

"No," he gasped, resenting the unexpected development, knowing it would destroy his scheme. He clutched her moist buttocks more firmly, but his actions only seemed to ignite hotter fires within her lurching, bucking, sweat-slick body.

The explosion came and he wrenched free of the arms and legs that enfolded him, tumbling off the couch and to the thick carpet. He watched her reach the peak, even without him, and watched fascinated as her torso did an impossible dance that was accompanied by a series of incoherent and pagan groans. Then, finally, she sank back on the cushions, one arm crossed over her eyes, her body totally limp in its depletion.

Mark felt his heart slow and his breathing return to some semblance of normalcy. He wiped the sweat from his face and stared dully up at the wood ceiling and glittering chandelier. He tried to make sense out of all that had happened but it was impossible. Looking back at the naked girl on the couch, he remembered the awe and fear that had shaken him only moments before and upon examining it, he felt that he'd been right in wanting to flee before the lure of her.

But what had happened to ruin his plan for destroying anything she might have felt for him? Certainly, no girl could have responded to the kind of treatment he'd inflicted on her. What the devil had triggered her into such a response? Was she one of those weird

females who needed to be maltreated before being capable of any enjoyment? No, she wasn't the type. What had he done to arouse her so?

He shook his head and rose slowly, gathering up his clothes and climbing into them as quietly as possible. She breathed deeply, her breasts holding a rhythm all their own, her knees drawn up almost to the still erect nipples. He could see teeth marks on the soft flesh and he experienced a twinge of guilt. Dressed finally, he stared at her a moment longer and then walked out of the huge room, closing the door behind him.

As he drove back to town, he was able to think more lucidly. The attraction each of them had felt was a purely animalistic thing. Opposites attract and no two people could be more opposite than Mark Brandon and Jayda Hood. That was why she wanted him, needed him, responded to him. It wasn't love, just a kind of emotional and physical lust.

At the same time, she was too young to recognize it as such and most likely, would interpret it all as being the real thing. That was the nameless danger he'd sensed back in the living room of the Hood Mansion. He'd sensed, rather than known, that she was more vulnerable than other girls in her need for a real man.

It wouldn't work . . . not for long anyhow.

For one thing, they came from different worlds. For another, he was too old for a kid barely out of her teens. Thirdly, she wasn't the kind he could keep on a string for an occasional fling whenever in the mood. Besides, he had his job to think about, the new

paper, and the way of life it represented. She'd change it all if given half the chance, even if she didn't realize she was doing it.

No, it wasn't any good. None of it.

There was only one problem. How the hell was he going to erase the sight of her flushed face, her pulsing breasts, her undulating body? How was he going to forget the feel of her silken skin and the sound of her sensual moans and the taste of her wet lips? Well, he'd better find a way or else start packing his bags.

EIGHT

It was a sparkling morning and as Jayda sat upon her wide bed and looked out across the sprawling awns and trees of the landscaped grounds. The sight seemed to wash away much of the soreness of her nude body.

She yawned and scratched her tangled hair and swung her legs over the side of the bed. Sitting there, breathing in the fragrant morning air, she could feel herself coming alive again. A second yawn completed the process and she sighed, subtly aware of a strange new physical contentment.

She smiled and cupped her weighty breasts with both hands, her eyes dwelling on each tiny reddish blotch she found on them. What a brute, she thought lovingly. Biting and pinching and grabbing and man-handling me as though I was . . . well, a common prostitute . . . and making me love it in the end.

The end.

She shuddered deliciously, remembering the awesome release.

At last she knew what all the shouting was about what made the world go round, what it meant to be woman. At last, after so many silly and foolish attempts with Gary and boys like him. It had been like a revelation, a crazy and blinding revelation. The terrible want of him that burned through her body like molten lava and then the furious hunger once her body was bared and she waited for him to join her on the couch.

The next part was the most incredible of all.

Jayda squeezed her breasts as she recalled how her senses had rebelled against the brutality of his assault. At first, she'd thought he'd lost his mind, lost control of his reason under the fury of his passion. He'd been too rough, much too rough for any woman to endure and yet . . . the basic fact remained that amid all the pain, when his strong hands had clamped upon her buttocks and his powerful fingers had dug into her flesh, she'd lost all touch with reality.

Perhaps the pain had been necessary?

Perhaps the roughness was what had been lacking in all her past encounters, thereby accounting for her inability to achieve satisfaction?

It was all too confusing and too new to be assessed with any degree of certainty. Jayda sighed again and jumped from the bed to skip nakedly across the sunlit bedroom. The hot stinging needles of the shower brought her body to an even higher degree of alertness and she hummed gaily as she dried herself with fluffy towel.

Mark Brannon.

There was no doubt about it. He was the answer to everything for Jayde. The answer to her nagging boredom, the answer to her wasted affection, the answer to her passionate needs—the answer to her whole purpose in life. Hang the job! Hang proving herself as a career girl!

Mark. He was all that mattered. With him she would have complete fulfillment.

As she slipped into her underthings and a fresh print dress, she hummed a favorite tune, a faint smile curving her lips and dimpling her cheeks.

She and Mark walking up the aisle . . . on a wonderful honeymoon . . . in their own home, where she would cook marvelous things when he came home each night . . . and the things they'd do after dinner . . . every night for years and years.

At last she understood the urge which had captured her girl friends one by one as they had tripped off to the strains of "The Wedding March." It had always seemed so obvious, so middle-class, so like the mating of a pair of rabbits.

Now it had meaning.

She hurried downstairs, remembering she was still alone in the house, and fixed herself an excellent breakfast: eggs, bacon, toast, coffee, orange juice. She was feeling very domestic as she waltzed and sang her way around the cheerful kitchen.

When she was finished, she snatched up her purse and hurried out to the garage. It was getting late and Mark—dear Mark—would be angry again if she missed her first deadline of the day.

She drove swiftly, but surely, a purposeful woman who knew where she was going and what things she must do when she arrived. She had a single, positive goal in life now. How wonderful to have a direction!

She bubbled inside, more certain by the minute that Mark must be feeling the same way, thinking the same things about her on such a morning.

She skidded into the parking lot and hopped out, tossing the attendant a salute as he stared after her.

Mark had been grumpy from the moment he walked into the office. The others had sensed it immediately, and felt the real sting of his mood as the morning grew older.

He buried his head in his work, occasionally lifting it to growl at a reporter or Butler or anyone else he could find within range.

“Hi, Mark.”

The greeting was lilting, musical, and it broke over him like a thousand bells. But it only deepened his depression, because it made his task more difficult. The task: to get Jayde out of his life. Out completely. The idea didn’t appeal to him one bit. He made himself look up, his eyes racing over Jayde’s lovely face and then to the clock.

“I’m on time, boss,” she said softly, making the words an intimate caress which no one else could see or hear.

“Give the lady a cigar,” he snapped. “Go sit down. I’ll call when I want you.”

She looked at him uncertainly, but only for a moment. Then she smiled. “I understand, Mark.”

He squinted at her, reading all sorts of meaning into her purring voice. "Wait a minute."

She paused.

Cut the cord quickly, he thought. "Exactly what do you understand?"

Her smile came on again. "You know, darling. You me—yesterday."

He got up, glancing around. "Come with me." He beckoned rudely, going ahead of her.

Mark led her into the photo lab, explored the dark room and found it empty. "In here." He closed the door behind him and glanced around at the rows of chemicals and the litter of film waste on the floor.

He leaned against the sink and studied her for a moment, wishing she didn't look so damned beautiful. "Now, what about you and me?"

She came forward, placing one hand on his chest. "Mark, darling. You know as well as I do that we found something yesterday . . . something new and wonderful."

He gazed at her, keeping his eyes hard.

Jayda didn't seem to notice. "You were so . . . masterful. I admit, at first, I was shattered, but then . . . oh, Mark, it was the first time I ever really . . . well, you know."

Mark kept his voice steady. "Will you please tell me what the hell you're talking about?"

She blinked. "About yesterday. About us."

He laughed, a cruel laugh, and watched the sound of it slap her across the face. "You must be kidding,"

he scoffed, letting his fingertips slide up the length of her arm. "Don't tell me you took it all seriously?"

Jayda Hood stared as though unable to make sense out of his words and attitude.

Mark let the fingers curl around her breast. He located the nipple through the material and manipulated it slowly as he maintained his cynical grin. "Look, you're a little confused, baby. Yesterday was a ball, but that's it. I'm not saying I might not come back for seconds some time, but not on a regular basis. Am I getting through to you?"

Jayda jerked out from under the insolent workings of his fingertips, her cheeks flushing red, her eyes burning brightly. "What are you saying? Do you mean, you didn't—"

Mark snorted derisively. "Oh, for crying out loud, grow up!"

She recoiled under the lash of his voice. "I'm sorry . . . but I can't believe all this is really happening. I just don't understand, Mark."

He saw that he had no choice but to hit her between the eyes with the cruel facts of life. "Okay, I'll spell it out for you. I'm not interested in playing footsie with the boss's daughter. I'm not interested in playing footsie with any broad on a fulltime basis. I intend to remain free." He paused a moment, letting the words sink home. "There can never be anything between us except what happened in your living room yesterday. If you want to keep it on that level, it's okay with me. As a matter of fact, you're a lot wilder

than I figured you to be." He smirked deliberately, allowing his eyes to travel down the front of her cious body. "What is it with you rich bro anyhow? The rougher a guy treats you, the be you like it."

Her hand flashed and stung his cheek, the sound echoing sharply in the small room. She gasped at the compulsive action and tears welled in her eyes. "C

Mark grinned. "Okay, that brings us to the subject for discussion . . . do you quit or do I have to invent some excuse for firing you?"

Jayda Hood sobbed and fled from the room, leaving the door wide open. Mark let out his breath and walked over to close it slowly. He lit a cigarette and inhaled deeply, his emotions in conflict. There was some measure of relief at having ended the threat to his bachelorhood, but at the same time, there was a nagging guilt at having behaved like a prize bastard.

He solved the problem by convincing himself that he'd done the kid a favor. She was better off without him, a helluva lot better off than she realized. Maybe in time she'd wise up and see it for herself . . . maybe . . .

The Deadline Room was crowded as usual that evening. Mark looked around at the faces in an effort to pull himself out of his annoying depression. His conscience was still bothering him and the drinks he'd been consuming at a rapid rate weren't improving his condition.

He sighed and waved to the bartender for a refill.

"So soon?"

Mark smiled at the uniformed barkeep. "I've got a thirst."

"You're telling me?"

As Mark was downing the double shot, Dottie Jones slid on the stool beside him and, in typical fashion, rubbed her large breasts against his arm. He looked at her and nodded. "Hello, baby. Work late?"

"A little. I've got a bastard of a boss."

Mark smiled and waved for another drink. "Want one?"

Dottie nodded indifferently and the bartender set down two drinks. "What's the occasion?" she asked.

"Celebrating."

"What?"

He held the glass carefully and studied it. "Fired the Hood girl today. At least, I think I did."

Dottie's face brightened. "Honest?"

"Don't look so brokenhearted."

She shrugged and tasted her drink. "All right, so I'm a cat. You know, I thought something had happened. I saw her running into the powder room this morning. I was going to go in and see if she was sick or something but Maxine Baker beat me to it. I didn't want to take a chance on interrupting anything so I stayed at my desk."

Mark turned to glare at her. "You saying there's something between Jayda Hood and Maxine?"

Dottie lowered her lashes. "All I know is what I see, boss. I've noticed Jayda spending time with Maxine every once in a while. Then, this morning . . .

well, they were in the powder room about fifteen minutes."

Mark gulped the stinging whiskey. "You're imagining things."

Dottie watched him carefully. "Would it bother you?"

"Would what bother me?"

"If Maxine was adding Jayda's scalp to her collection."

Mark growled impatiently. "Look, finish your drink and get lost, huh?"

Dottie hooked his arm with her own. "Don't get mad, honey. Why don't you come up to my place and let me try to get you in a better mood? We could always play statues again."

"Not tonight. I'm not in the mood to play games."

Dottie Jones started to speak but then sighed and removed her arm. She slid from the stool and adjusted her skirt. "If you should happen to change your mind later on, don't bother to call. Just come over. I'll leave the door unlocked."

"Sure, sure."

He watched her walk out the door through the huge mirror behind the bar, her heavy breasts jiggling with each step, her peroxide hair glittering under the colored lights. No, Dottie Jones wasn't the answer. A female, maybe . . . but not Dottie. Besides, he wasn't nearly drunk enough as yet.

He was working on his sixth double shot when he saw a couple emerge from one of the booths in the shadowed rear and start toward the exit. As they

drew closer, he recognized his assistant, Barry Butler . . . and a split second later, the girl with him. It was the new copy girl, Nancy, and she looked as though her first encounter with hard liquor had her a bit woozy.

Barry looked sheepish as they drew abreast of Mark. "Hi, boss."

"Hello, Mister Brannon."

"Good evening, children."

Barry cleared his throat. "Eh, excuse me a minute, will you? I want to get a pack of cigarettes."

The pretty blonde teenager was swaying slightly as she smiled at Mark. "Mister Butler invited me to stop for a drink."

"Yeah, Mister Butler's bighearted that way."

She frowned slightly, her peaches-and-cream complexion flushed and her blue eyes just slightly glazed. "I guess you don't approve."

"Well, you are out pretty late, aren't you?"

"I'm not a child."

Mark saw her draw in her breath to underline her statement. The round breasts strained the material of her dress and her stomach went flat. He mentally congratulated Barry for sensing when a girl was ripe for plucking. "No, I guess you're not," Mark smiled, lifting a glass in a mock salute to her frontal development.

She glowed happily. "I don't have to be home for another hour. I mean, if you wanted me to stay while, it would be okay."

"Mister Butler might not like that."

NINE

Jayda stepped out of the deep tub and brushed away a few of the scented soap bubbles from her glistening thighs. She rubbed the towel over her glowing body, pausing once to take another sip of the tall ink she had refilled three times during her long bath. When she heard the telephone ring, she wrapped the towel around herself and hurried into the bedroom, slightly startled to find that the liquor had combined with the fragrant heat of the bath to make her rather dizzy.

"Hello?"

Maxine Baker's husky voice drifted through the connection. "Hi, sweetie. I just thought I'd call to see how you were feeling. Still down in the dumps?"

"A little, I guess."

"Need a broad shoulder to cry on?"

Jayda frowned, suddenly uneasy. "I don't think so."

"Suit yourself, but it's going to be a long, lonely night."

It was true, Jayda knew. Even the drinks hadn't helped make the hours pass any the faster since she'd returned home from the office. "I just stepped out of the bath," she murmured absently.

"So? Just throw on some clothes and jump in your car and I'll have a bottle all chilled by the time you arrive," Maxine stated in a light tone. "Come on, honey, don't be stubborn. Come over and let me help you get Mark Brannon out of your system once and for all."

Jayda flinched at the mention of Mark's name. "I don't know . . ."

"What are you afraid of?" Maxine purred softly.

Jayda felt a flush steal up her throat. She gripped the telephone more tightly and subconsciously checked an impulse to hang up on the insinuating voice. "Why should I be afraid of you?" she asked stiffly. "That's silly."

"Of course. Then you'll come?"

Still, she hesitated, hating herself because she knew the true reason. It had nothing to do with Maxine, nothing to do with the beautiful librarian's strange effect on her . . . it was just that a tiny part of her still refused to accept all that Mark had said to her that day. She was hoping that he'd call and apologize and say it had all been some kind of a crazy act. A joke, perhaps.

"Are you still there, cookie?"

"Yes, I'm still here."

"Look, I'll expect you at my door within the hour. Believe me, sweetie, you won't be sorry you came."

The line clicked dead and Jayda stared at the receiver, wondering if she should feel flattered or annoyed. It disturbed her that Maxine was so aware of how she felt about Mark's rejection. It also disturbed her that Maxine should talk in so possessive a fashion on such a short friendship.

One thing was true, though. She was lonely and miserable and it was going to be a long night.

Jayda put the receiver down and ran her fingers through her damp hair in a show of restlessness. The low of the whiskey was wearing off and she was becoming aware of an inner tension that was worsening her mood. Her body had always demanded regular attention and protested when she abstained for too long a time, but the inner tension she was experiencing at that moment was the worst she could recall.

It was because of Mark.

Those frenzied, frantic, painful, glorious minutes spent with him on the living room couch had awakened new passions in her. And, having been awakened, they were crying out for further expression and appeasement. Maybe it was best to get out of the house and be with someone? Maybe she could keep her mind off Mark and what he'd made possible the previous day? Maybe it would do her good to pour out her frustrations to another girl and drown her sorrows in a vat of whiskey?

She loosened the towel and allowed it to trail after her as she padded nakedly to stand before the full-

length mirror. The points of her breasts were strangely erect, she noted. Her cheeks looked flushed. She studied her body from head to toes. "There's something wrong with the picture, Miss Hood," she said aloud. "Your body is as beautiful as ever and I love every curve of it, but it's entirely too sober."

She went to the dresser and pulled another bottle from the bottom drawer. She poured a bathroom glass half full and swallowed some of the stuff. It burned horribly and she coughed, the tears coming to her yes. What horrible poison!

She returned to the mirror, carrying her glass, watching herself. Presently the glow started in her stomach. Hmm. Not bad. There was something to straight whiskey after all. She smiled and winked at herself, smacking her lips loudly. Again she swallowed and the liquor went down more easily, seeming to spread the glow faster.

"Poor Miss Hood," she continued. "She needs a pal and she needs a man. Gary Williams? Not on your life. You're not turning the clock back that far, girl."

Perhaps . . . just perhaps . . . she should go to Maxine and pour out her problems. Get the whole mess off her chest. Purge herself of the bitterness, the frustration, the sexual inadequacy which had plagued her for so long.

All this would only be done with words, of course. Words and a few friendly drinks.

No. You're being foolish, asking for trouble.

Yet, Maxine probably enjoyed the company of loads of girls. She drank deeply again, refilling her glass, seeing the image in the mirror begin to blur.

She set the glass aside, wiping whiskey from her lip, and stepped close to the mirror. Yes, everything looked good. She was in beautiful condition. She spread her fingers around her waist, pleased that she could still encircle much of its slimness. Her hands slid up over her ribs and, casually, she cupped her breasts. Yes. Full and heavy, but no sag. Down over her hips, around toward the back.

She flinched. Careful, lass. You know that's the anger spot. Look how you're quivering just thinking bout it. Mark! How she wanted him at that moment. Right now. If only he were to step through that door!

Stick to the subject. It had been too many hours ince Mark, and her body was like a loaded pistol. Any sort of jar could set it off with a roar.

A very bad situation, indeed.

She turned away from the mirror, drained her glass, and went to the closet. She found a reasonably clean pair of white short shorts and she stepped into them, working them up over her hips, tugging the zipper closed. Then she picked up a thin pullover and put it on. The thing was too tight and her breasts strained against its knitted material.

Pretty sexy, young lady.

It's a hot midsummer night, silly, and why wear all the accessories when it'll be strictly girl talk? I'm not going to the theater.

Only to talk?

That's what I said.

What about your breasts, heavy with yearning; your belly, hollow with desire; your derriere, tingling with anticipation?

The night air will help cool me, damn it. Won't you let me go calling? What harm can talk do?

She marched to the mirror, stuck out her tongue and flounced to the door, car keys jangling in her hand. On the way she stopped for a few final swallows, drinking directly from the bottle.

"Hi. I had a hunch you wouldn't pass up my invitation."

Maxine opened the door all the way and waved Jayde into a large and comfortable front room. It was very feminine, with fluffy pillows, pink curtains and overstuffed furniture.

Jayde turned to her hostess and smiled. It was important that she make her understand immediately. "I need to talk, Maxine. You were right about that."

"Sure, honey. How about something to drink while we expound on the beastly males of our generation?" She smiled knowingly. "What have you been having, whiskey?"

"Well, yes, but you don't . . ."

"Nonsense. I'm way behind."

She headed for the kitchen while Jayde watched. She was a striking woman with her long legs made even longer by high heels, her skin satiny, the firm

muscles rippling under the surface. Well endowed, too, in all the physical attributes any girl would be proud to possess.

"Here we are," she called, hurrying back with two glasses and a bottle. She waved at the couch, setting it down on a coffee table.

Jayde hesitated an instant and then followed, sitting a discreet distance. Maxine's body was covered by a translucent negligee, fastened only at her throat with a knitted bow. Underneath, Jayde caught glimpses of panties and bra—all very feminine.

If-consciously, she looked down at herself, wishing she'd worn something more. The liquor had reduced some of its hold on her body and she wondered if she were presentable in only short shorts and a knitted sweater.

"Don't worry about it, honey," Maxine purred. "Take a drink and you'll be able to relax."

"What?"

"You're wondering what you're doing here. You don't need to put on airs with me. Come when you want and wear as much or as little as you like. The door is always unhooked." Maxine's smile was sinfully friendly.

Jayde perched on the edge of the couch and, on impulse, she lifted her glass, gulping the whiskey half way.

Maxine settled back and sipped, her appraising eyes sweeping over Jayde's figure. "Cigarette?"

"Why not?" She helped herself from the box her

hostess offered, letting Maxine light it for her, their hands touching briefly.

She drank again, feeling the full effects of her earlier drinking now, feeling the room begin to tilt. Abruptly, she sat back, afraid she'd slip to the floor.

"Now. Tell me your troubles, girl."

Jayde shrugged, feeling her breasts bob freely under her pullover. She wondered if Maxine noticed. Were they really heavier and harder tonight? "You already know and I suppose, everyone else does, too. My city editor is making life miserable."

Maxine nodded. "I wish I could help. Is there anything I can do?" She leaned forward, her hand on Jayde's arm.

Jayde flinched involuntarily, becoming increasingly confused. She'd cringed at the touch, but somehow it felt good. Warm and friendly. "I . . . I guess you're helping by letting me talk this way."

But it wasn't helping. Just talking about it did nothing to put out her fires. And neither would sitting like this so close to a female who Jayda suspected would offer everything at the slightest invitation.

"Something's going on in that little mind of yours," Maxine said huskily, leaning forward. The negligee fell away from either side of her hips. She had a magnificently rounded body, emphasized by her natural coloring. Her rippling ribs showed and the deep indentation at the lower center of her stomach winked out.

"It's nothing . . . really." She looked around wildly. "I think perhaps . . ."

Maxine put her hand on her arm—again it felt comforting—and refilled Jayde's glass. "Come on. Drink up."

Jayde did so, hardly feeling the liquor slide down her throat. Her stomach felt it, however, doing a dangerous flip or two before settling down and letting the glow radiate through the rest of her body. Mistily, he looked down at the hand on her forearm. "You really shouldn't touch me that way, you know." She lost control of her vocal cords. What on earth was she trying to say?

"Oh?" Maxine goaded, pursing her lips. "Something bothering you?"

Jayda moistened her lips, aware that her heart was pounding. "Yes. Yes, you're bothering me. You've been bothering me ever since that day in the front room."

Maxine smiled happily. "Really?"

Jayda flushed. "You're gay, aren't you?"

"That's too mild a word for it, sweetie."

Jayda gulped. There, it was out in the open. A secret that she had secretly suspected and refused to admit to herself had been easily and in fact, almost proudly admitted. Jayda was startled that she was not experiencing any revulsion or shock or fear. Perhaps it was all the whiskey?

Maxine was sliding closer so that their hips were touching. "Let's not talk about me though," she whispered soothingly. "You're the one with the problem. It's Mark Brannon, isn't it? What happened? He made a fool out of you?"

Jayda bit on her lip and nodded miserably.

Maxine stroked her hair. "They're all alike, baby."

Jayda was surprised at the brittle hardness of her voice as she replied to the general statement. "I wish that was true but unfortunately, they're not all alike. Mark wasn't the first for me . . . but he was the first to make me . . . well, feel like a woman, damn him!"

Maxine chuckled softly. "I think I understand. He's turned you on and now you can't be satisfied with all your other young men."

Jayda nodded. "Something like that."

"Well now," Maxine smiled, "what can we do about it? I suppose you could always get down on your knees and beg Mark to toss you a crumb of affection every now and then."

Jayda flared angrily. "Never!"

Maxine refilled the glass and handed it to Jayda. "No, I don't suppose that would work anyhow. His social calendar is pretty full, what with Dottie Jones and the various beauty queens that keep walking into our office looking for free publicity."

"Beauty queens?" Jayda asked dully, swallowing another drink.

Maxine smirked. "Mark has a lovely little routine. He gives them free space in return for a free sample of the merchandise. It happens all the time. Finish your drink, honey."

Jayda felt fuzzy. "And Dottie Jones?"

"Oh, that's a long time thing. Dottie's been swinging with Mark ever since she went to work for the

paper. I guess you could say that they're a steady
duo."

Jayda leaned her head back, totally despondent, and closed her eyes. What a fool she'd been to take him seriously! And even more of a fool for thinking that behavior that day had been all an act!

"Jayda, baby?"

"Yes?"

"I think I know a way to remedy the situation."

Before Jayda could react, she felt Maxine's soft lips pressing against her own. It was a strange and yet pleasant sensation and she remained still, eyes closed, unable to move or speak. Hands were caressing her bare thighs gently, fleetingly, and Maxine's lips were tingling and the breath that flowed into her mouth was sweet and warm. It was all so intoxicating, so delicate, so pleasurable.

"Stand up, honey."

"I don't think I can," Jayda whispered dizzily, feeling herself being lifted. She caught her breath as she felt fingers opening the zipper of her shorts. "No, don't . . ." she mumbled, afraid to open her eyes, afraid of what she was beginning to feel . . . to want.

The shorts fell to the carpet and hands were at her waist, tugging on her pullover. She felt it being tugged over her breasts and she lifted her arms involuntarily.

"There! How lovely!"

Jayde was again taken by the hand and Maxine was leading her to a door. She opened it and urged Jayde

ahead. Naked and trembling, Jayda entered a large room, the bedroom, she supposed, but it was like no bedroom she'd ever seen.

There was no bed, only wall-to-wall mattresses. Each mattress was covered in a different gay print so that it was a sea of colored rectangles, dotted here and there by satin pillows. Maxine's bedroom things were arranged on a single low table along one wall.

She moved forward several steps, staring straight ahead at the impossible wall. It was one solid mirror. There must have been another behind her, because she saw her reflection repeated again and again to infinity.

"Please, Maxine . . ."

The taller woman was behind her, her hands snaking under her arms to fasten themselves gently over her breasts. Numb as she was, Jayde's screaming senses felt every caress and cried for more. She felt her breasts harden and the nipples turn to hot stone as Maxine's fingers toyed with their tips.

Fascinated, she watched the performance in the mirrors. "Maxine, you shouldn't . . ."

Apparently Maxine remembered Jayde's weakness, for her hips began a slow, effective swaying against her guest's derriere, sending fire shooting through her body.

"Maxine . . ." she choked the word.

Maxine was on her knees now, her hands pulling at Jayde to join her on the ever-so-soft carpet of mattresses. Jayde felt her knees yielding and soon she collapsed to the lushness.

the sun would lighten the sky, but at that moment, the night and Jayda's mood were at their blackest.

How could she have done such things?

How could she have allowed them to happen?

She hadn't been that drunk.

She tried hard not to remember, not to acknowledge the satiety that relaxed her body as she steered the car toward the Hood Mansion. All right, so the inner tension was gone, but that didn't excuse her actions. If necessary, the next time, she'd find a man to appease her nagging needs. Gary Williams, for example. Perhaps, with all she'd learned in the past two days, she could guide him toward fulfilling her passions. No, she admitted, it wouldn't work.

Only Mark Brannon was man enough for her.

And only Maxine Baker was woman enough.

Jayda shuddered fearfully, realizing that at that moment, she couldn't separate the two of them in her mind.

TEN

Hunter Hood was holding his annual party for the employees of *The News*. Over a hundred guests were present and the grounds were alive with decorations, lights and music. Everyone was dressed in his and her best finery for the occasion and Mark Brannon was no exception. He only hoped he wasn't going to spoil the celebration for Hunter Hood by informing him that his precious daughter was about to receive the pink slip.

Mark had waited nearly a week for Jayda to make things easier all around by quitting but the girl had stubbornly showed up at her desk each and every morning. He'd finally been forced to face up to the unpleasant task of having to expose himself to the possible repercussions of firing her. And he'd decided that the party might as well be the time to announce the fact to his boss.

He wasn't looking forward to the chore.

They'd had their buffet dinner some two hours earlier, washing it down with a fine white wine from the

Rhone Valley. Later had come the after-dinner drinks and then the explosive highballs.

About ten o'clock, Hood, his salt and pepper mustache drooping slightly, heaved himself from his chair and clapped his hands in the center of the room. The impeccably behaved guests quieted at once, turning attentive eyes to him.

"You're a beautiful group of boys and girls and I'm mighty pleased you could honor my house this evening," he began, a wine-edged smile on his face.

"Hear, hear," someone called and everybody applauded.

"But I'm an old man"—murmurs of protest—"compared to the rest of you, so it's time for me to take my tired bones upstairs. But don't let me end your fun. I'll seal myself in my apartment and you can burn the rest of the house down, for all I care." He winked and they laughed. "The servants will leave at midnight, so from then on just help yourselves to whatever you see." He reached and pinched Dottie Jones on the seat and she squealed appropriately. "Like that."

There was lots of good-natured laughter and numerous expressions of thanks as everyone shook hands with the publisher. With a final wave, he disappeared up the broad staircase.

There was a discreet silence for about thirty seconds and then everyone exploded into animated conversation. They'd been given the green light and now they set out to have themselves a ball.

Mark started toward one of the many portable beds

saw Jayda approaching from another direction, and sharply veered his course. He'd been avoiding her ever since his arrival, knowing that any further conversation would be pointless and perhaps, a bit painful. Being there at the Hood Mansion only made him more certain that things could never work out between them. He didn't belong in such surroundings and never would. Besides, he wasn't capable of being the kind of husband a girl like Jayda deserved. Hell, he wasn't even sure he was capable of loving anyone, except possibly himself.

No, she was better off without him.

Geezuz, how many times had he told himself that line?

Someone latched onto his arm as he neared another bar and as usual, that someone was Dottie Jones. "How's it going, honey?" he asked pleasantly, welcoming her company if for no other reason than an additional buffer against any possible approach by Jayda. "Drink?"

"Natch."

Mark ordered two from one of the catering staff. He handed Dottie hers and clinked glasses. "Smooth sailing."

Dottie's eyes were unusually sober as they studied him over the rim of the glass. When she lowered her drink, she drew him off to one side and stood looking up into his face with the same grave expression. "Mind if I talk straight from the shoulder, boss?"

Mark was suddenly struck by how attractive the society reporter looked that night. The gold lam-

dress did wonders for her ripely curved figure and her glittering blonde hair was handsomely coiffured. "Shoot."

"Promise you won't get too sore or accuse me of . . . well, of playing dirty pool?"

"I promise."

Dottie Jones drew a deep breath as though bracing herself for what she had to say. "First of all, I want you to know that there's no mystery about where I fit into your life. I've accepted it and . . . well, I want it. I'm aware you're not the kind of guy who's ready to settle down. I kind of doubt whether you'll ever be."

Mark grinned. "So do I, plumcake."

Dottie failed to smile. "But Jayda Hood's the marrying kind, Mark."

He sobered and looked down at his glass. "So?"

"So give the kid a break and let her off the hook."

Mark looked across the crowded terrace. "Believe me, Dottie, I've been trying to do just that. It isn't easy."

"You mean it?"

Mark nodded. "Very much. Even with Hunter Hood for her old man, the kid's love-starved. I can't give her that jazz. I'm not the type. She picked me out of the mob, hoping for a hearts-and-flowers routine together with . . . well, with high-powered sex. She picked the wrong guy but I don't know how to convince her of the fact."

Dottie sighed resignedly. "There's only one way, Mark. It's rough but it never fails."

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"What's that?"

"Hurt her."

Mark grimaced. "I tried that bit the other day and it backfired."

Dottie scowled at him. "I don't mean physically, you sap. Of course, it backfired. You're probably the first man who ever dared treat her like a slave. She probably loved it . . . and you for doing it."

Mark was confused. "Look, I even gave her a hard time at the office. I told her it was all over. I told her the score."

"Sometimes telling isn't enough."

Mark studied Dottie a moment and it came to him. "I've got to prove it, huh? Show her."

"Right. And, I might add, in a way she won't forget."

Mark grunted and thought it over. After a moment, he took Dottie by the arm and headed to a group where Barry Butler was performing a few sleight-of-hand stunts. "Hey, Barry, come over here a minute, huh?"

"Sure, boss."

"I want you to do a favor for me. Listen carefully."

Barry listened, frowning bewilderedly, as Mark gave him specific instructions. The young man was about to ask a question when Mark had finished but Mark cut him short. Barry shrugged and glanced at his wristwatch and then nodded. "Whatever you say, boss."

Mark steered Dottie away from the crowd. "Let's go."

"Where?"

"Never mind. Just follow the leader, sweetie."

Mark led the way, holding her hand as they crept through the darkness, walking down a slope away from the house. The path made two or three turns and then they were on the broad apron which surrounded the pool.

The moon and the dim glow from the yard cast enough light so they could see. The water glistened darkly and refreshingly in the warm night.

Dottie didn't waste a moment. Turning, she presented her back so he could run her zipper down, parting the gold lamé all the way to her derriere. She shimmied out of the thing, stripped away her underthings and raced to the edge of the water.

She turned and smiled at him, the moonlight striking white teeth. Then she whirled and dove, arms over her head, parting the water cleanly. She surfaced in the center, spouting water from her lips, and beckoned.

He flung off his coat and pants, ripped away his shirt and stripped off his shorts as he hobbled toward the edge. He scrambled on to the board and executed a clean dive of his own. The water hit his skin like a tub of cooling champagne, washing away the days and weeks of tension, worry and concern for the future.

At the depth of the dive, Mark's chest grazed the smooth bottom and he stroked toward the two sturdy legs planted in front of him. He ducked between them, extended his arms, and stood quickly up, lifting

Dottie high on his shoulders. She giggled and pulled his hair to maintain her balance.

"What are you doing?" he demanded, feeling her wet but warm thighs hugging his cheeks.

"I was just thinking of how exciting it would be if I could turn you around right now," she laughed.

Mark grunted and heaved her backwards. She splashed and came up sputtering, water dripping from the pink tips of her large and glistening breasts. He cupped them in his hands, enjoying the coolness. Dottie gasped and leaned close to him, rubbing her breasts and thighs and belly against him. Her mouth sought to capture his lips.

Despite the cold water, Mark felt passion heating their bodies. He managed to hold her quietly a moment while he again caressed the sensitive nipples and breathed teasingly into her ear. Dottie buckled and moaned as the tips stiffened and rose under the manipulations of his fingers.

"Mark," she groaned weakly. "You're getting wild."

"That's the way I want you, baby," he muttered grimly.

Her hands were on him, speeding his desires. He guided her toward and up the ladder at the end of the pool. She looked around, cheeks flushed. "There," she cried eagerly. "There, Mark."

He looked and grinned. "Why not?"

He scooped her squirming, wet body up in his arms and carried her out on the diving board. He placed her down near its end, so that her head hung over the

water. He used his teeth gently on the twin peaks and her hips began to writhe heatedly, as though desperately seeking to make contact with his body.

"Not yet, honey," he murmured, allowing his lips to trail down over the smoothness of her belly and linger tantalizingly at the dimple of her navel.

Dottie Jones convulsed, her nails raking his back, her blonde hair swinging wetly as her head tossed back and forth over the edge of the sturdy diving board. She was groaning huskily, a continuous sound, and her bodily contortions were becoming totally abandoned as she sought wantonly to terminate his teasing. "Please," she grated. "Please, Mark. I can't stand any more. Oh, Mark, please."

Mark paused just long enough to steal a quick look at his romantic surroundings. The sounds of the party were muted and the trees shut out most of the colored lanterns. He frowned, searching the darkness, waiting for some sign or sound. As he waited, his hands idly toyed with the swollen breasts of the naked female stretched out so brazenly on the board.

Then, suddenly, he felt her two hands at his hair, clutching and twisting and demanding and forcing him to put an end to his waiting . . .

The last thing he was conscious of was Dottie's shrieking cry of ecstasy as her slippery body arched to accept him.

ELEVEN

Jayda Hood had planned to maneuver Mark innon into a final face-to-face showdown some time during the party, but all attempts had failed due to the large crowd that prevented either of them from enjoying a moment to themselves. It had seemed to her that he'd deliberately been avoiding her, using various employees of *The News* as shields. And now that the affair had taken on a less formal atmosphere, allowing her to be somewhat less polite and somewhat more brazen in her activities, Mark was nowhere to be found.

"Looking for me, honey?"

Jayda frowned and dodged Maxine Baker's outstretched hand as the tall brunette sought to pull her over to a shadowed corner of the lawn. "I'm sorry, Maxine," she lied. "I was just on my way to the kitchen to check with the caterers."

"I'll go with you."

"No, really. I'll see you later."

Jayda hurried on nervously, not trusting herself to be in Maxine's company again before she had the chance to confront Mark once more with her feeling for him. What happened at Maxine's apartment was still vivid in her mind, tantalizingly vivid, and Jayda truly didn't know whether she'd have the strength to avoid a repeat performance if Maxine managed to get her alone again.

"Barry? Barry, did you see Mister Brannon?"

Barry Butler seemed relieved. "As a matter of fact, I'm supposed to . . ." he stopped, cleared his throat, and looked toward the rear of the grounds. "I, eh, think I saw him heading out that way a little while ago. If you'd like, I'll help you find him."

Jayda let him take her arm and walk with her in the general direction of the pool. "I don't want to be rude, Barry, but I want to talk to Mark alone."

"Sure, I understand. I'll just make sure you find him and then I'll take off."

She smiled gratefully at him as he led her through the darkness and through the rows of trees. It seemed to her that Barry was behaving unusually gallant and maintaining an unusual silence as they moved further away from the party and closer to the pool area but, in her impatience to see Mark, she couldn't spare the effort to examine his attitude too deeply.

Barry turned the corner ahead of her and stopped in his tracks. "Well, I'll be!" he exclaimed softly, chuckling a bit.

Jayda reached his side and looked up the length of the long, lighted pool. "Oh!"

Barry shook his head and moved away. "Mission accomplished," he murmured inanely, leaving her and heading back to the party.

Jayda stood rooted to the spot in numbed shock, unable to tear her eyes from the naked couple so persistently engaged on the diving board. It took several seconds for the shock to wear off sufficiently for Jayda to realize that the woman being loved so ardently was Dottie Jones. And as the shock abated, a violent revulsion and disgust rose through her body, causing her to shudder uncontrollably. A sob came up from her throat and hot tears scalded her eyes and blurred her vision. She whirled and stumbled blindly away from the spectacle, a low branch of the tree whipping her cheek as she plunged into the wooded darkness.

How could he?

What kind of a man was he?

How could she have thought she loved him?

The sobs and tears came without interruption as she continued to run aimlessly away from the ugliness and heartbreak. She heard someone call her name but she was too numb to react until, a moment later, a hand caught her arm. She nearly fell as the hands turned her around.

"Jayda, baby," the voice crooned. "What is it?"

She sank into the perfumed embrace, muffling the sobs against the silk-covered breasts. She felt the hands soothing her and soft murmurs of compassion being whispered into her ear. "Oh, Maxine . . ." she wept brokenly, allowing the taller, stronger female to

guide her over into the deep shadows of a cluster of trees. "It's Mark."

"I know, baby," Maxine murmured. "I understand. It's all for the best, believe me. No man is worth it."

Jayda closed her eyes and leaned back against the tree trunk, not listening to Maxine's husky words, not feeling Maxine's gently caressing hands. She felt hollow inside and sick to the very core. She didn't care that Maxine was kissing her or that Maxine was opening her dress and touching her. It just didn't seem to matter anymore.

"... feel better, darling, you'll see."

Jayda returned to reality the instant she felt the flowing lips fuse moistly with the exposed points of her breasts. A wave of pleasure rippled through her body, bringing it back to life. Hands slid down her bare back, loosening the dress still further, until they were gliding over her panties, igniting her nerves and sensés with the fiery tingle that had so often been her doom.

"Maxine . . . don't . . ." she whispered hoarsely, her face still flushed and wet from the sobbing. Please . . ."

"Don't fight it, Jayda," Maxine stated softly. "We both know this is the way it's going to be for us from now on."

"No . . ."

"Yes."

Jayda shivered as her body began to heat dangerously. "Stop. Stop it," she cried, shoving Maxine away.

The gorgeous brunette looked angry for a second, her beautiful eyes narrowing. "I think it's time I stepped out of character with you, young lady. I think perhaps it's the only way I can make you admit the truth about yourself."

Jayda shivered, her evening dress hanging loosely from her waist, her bare breasts heaving and throbbing. "What do you mean?"

Maxine smiled evilly. "I thought I convinced you the other night at my apartment, but evidently I failed. All right, I'll have to do it another way." The tall brunette moved closer and Jayda shrank fearfully. "You remember what I told you the other night, darling? About my always being the man in our kind of relationship? Well, we're going to change roles tonight. I'm going to be the femme and you're going to do all the work . . . and I do mean, all the work. Maybe then you'll become a permanent member of the club."

Jayda's jangled brain couldn't make sense out of what Maxine was saying but her instinct warned her against danger. She tried to dodge the brunette's hands and flee back to the safety of the party but Maxine was too quick and too strong for her. "Maxine! Have you gone crazy? Let me go! What are you doing?"

Maxine's hands were forcing Jayda down to her knees in the dewy grass. "I'm not doing anything, baby," she muttered fiercely. "You're the one who's *doing* tonight."

Jayda heard the rustle of Maxine's expensive dress and then realized why she was being held in the kneeling position. Terror flooded her together with a revulsion even stronger than she'd experienced back at the pool. She cried out and twisted away from the nearness of Maxine's sculptured body, her heart thumping wildly, her brain feeling as though it was about to explode.

"Oh, stop squirming," Maxine rasped impatiently, trying to contain Jayda's protesting form. "It's not all that difficult. Open your eyes, damn it!"

"No . . . no . . ."

It seemed as though a cloud of musky perfume had descended upon her. Jayda could feel herself weakening, not from desire but from a sense of total hopelessness. Maxine's hands were twisting in her hair cruelly and Jayda felt as though she had lost contact with the rest of the world. It was all so sordid, so perverted, so ugly, so . . . twisted.

The intense revulsion generated a new wave of strength and Jayda was able to break free and shove the gleaming thighs away from her. She scrambled to her feet and stood, panting raggedly, facing the gorgeous young woman now only partially dressed. "I won't," Jayda hissed. "I won't be like you! Never! Never!"

Maxine Baker opened her mouth to speak and then closed it again. She let out her breath and sighed, slowly commencing to fasten the hidden clasps of her dress. "Suit yourself, cookie. Go find your lover boy

and stand at the end of the line, if that's what you want. As for me . . . well, I think I'll manage to find myself another playmate. I always do."

Jayda hurried away from the taunting words, her fingers shaking as they tried to repair the damage done to her cocktail dress. She finally drew the zipper and adjusted it over her breasts, wondering how and when Maxine had been able to remove her bra without Jayda being aware of it. When she was far enough away to stop and draw a steadyng breath, Jayda realized she could not return to the party and face the many employees of her father's newspaper.

She never wanted to see them again. She never wanted to be a part of them again. Her father had been right, it was a jungle . . . a world all its own . . . a world where she'd never belong. It had all been a mistake . . . a terrible, horrible mistake.

Without thinking consciously about it, Jayda turned and started walking across the grounds toward the adjoining estate. She occupied her mind with thoughts of Mark and Dottie and Maxine and all the other people whose world she'd attempted to penetrate and, in truth, change. Did she really have the right to feel sullied and violated and resentful? Whatever had happened to her had happened because of her own decision and not theirs. Whatever heartbreak she'd experienced, she'd experienced because of her own schoolgirlish presumption.

What a fool she'd been. What a ridiculous fool.

She went down the familiar path leading through the high walls of hedges that separated the Hood Man-

sion from the Williams Estate. She wondered idly how many times she and Gary had travelled that same path throughout the years of their childhood. Somehow, at that awful moment, the very familiarity of the surroundings comforted and reassured her.

She stopped at the side of the towering house and looked up at the lighted window on the second floor. Stooping, she scooped a handful of pebbles and threw them at the window. They struck the glass and made a clatter that ruffled the stillness.

The drapes parted more widely and Gary appeared at the window. He opened it and looked out. "Jayda?"

"Over here," she replied, feeling awkward and embarrassed.

"What's wrong?"

"Come down, Gary. I want to talk to you."

He nodded, appearing startled. "Sure . . . sure, right away."

While she awaited him, Jayda walked across a neatly manicured yard to a canopied lawn swing. She adjusted the soft cushions and sat down, wondering what she was doing there and whether it was wise for her to be with Gary when in so shaken a mood. No, she knew what she was doing, she told herself. The only misfortune was that she hadn't known what was best for her all along.

Gary Williams came trotting around the side of the house, clad in a white tee shirt and khaki pants. "Jayda?"

"Here, Gary."

He stopped running and walked toward her, looking clean and young and handsome in the moonlight. "Something wrong? I thought you folks were having our party tonight?"

"Please sit down, Gary."

He sat beside her, studying her face. "There is something wrong. Want to tell me about it, Jayda?"

She felt like crying. "I've been a damn fool, Gary. I thought I had to prove something to myself . . . to everybody . . ."

Gary smiled. "Yeah, I know."

Jayda shook her head miserably. "I made such a mess out of it all. And such a damned nuisance out of myself." She turned to look at him. "Gary? Do you really love me?"

He nodded slowly. "Very much. I guess I always will, honey."

Jayda braced herself. "Will you marry me?"

He frowned. "You make it sound as though I'd be doing you a favor."

She winced and hung her head. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean it to sound that way. I do love you, Gary. I've loved you ever since we were children but I thought . . . well, I thought love had to be wild and exciting and . . . oh, I don't know."

"There are different kinds of love, Jayda."

She looked at him, struck by the sudden maturity of his voice and the perception of his words. "Yours is the lasting kind, isn't it?" she asked humbly, wanting to know.

"I think so," he replied. "But it could become wild

and exciting if you give it a chance. Like anything else, you only get out of something what you put into it."

Jayda flung herself into his arms, the tears flowing again. "Can you ever forgive me for being such a spoiled brat, Gary?"

He laughed and stroked her hair. "I think so."

"Will you marry me?"

"Are you proposing?"

She smiled through her tears. "Yes."

He grinned. "Okay, I accept." He pulled her close and kissed her ardently, his strong arms holding her tightly as his teeth bruised her lips.

Jayda sighed happily. "Promise me something . . ."

"Anything."

"Promise me you'll always be boss . . . and that if I ever act up again, you'll spank the daylights out of me."

"You've got my word."

"Treat me like your woman, Gary," she whispered heatedly, pulling him down atop her on the swing, "not like a precious toy. Be rough . . . be gentle . . . be fierce . . . be tender . . . be whatever you want to be." She shivered as she felt his hands loosening her dress. "And make me be whatever you want me to be for you, darling."

"You talk too much," he muttered hoarsely, impatiently stripping himself of his clothes. Then, almost angrily, his mouth closed over hers again and they were locked in a feverish embrace. Despite his ferocious

Jayda made no sound of protest or pain, welcomed his ardor with wanton movement. Gary tore the final garment from her a muffled curse of frustration. "This is a day to celebrate our engagement."

Jayda laughed joyously and arched to meet him once in her sexual life, she required no formal preliminaries, no erotic appetizers. There was something deeper between them, something that prepared each of them for lovemaking more thoroughly than any clever caressing and patient foreplay. She could feel her passion mounting quickly as he moved with him freely and happily. His hands gripped her hips, his fingers digging into her flesh, his thumbs bruising her shoulder but she gloried in the moment they reflected. His body was demands.

"Oh, Gary!" she cried, the explosion imminent. It came, rocking her senses, shattering her mind, shaking her taut nakedness . . . and it was more intense and more thrilling and more meaningful than she had ever dreamed it could be. And she knew it would always be that way for her . . . for them . . . always . . . always . . .

STRANGERS FOR LOVERS

by

JAY HART

An Original Novel

A MIDWOOD BOOK

STRANGERS FOR LOVERS

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STRANGERS FOR LOVERS



ONE

"You can't be serious!" Carol gasped. She fought to control her rising temper. "Why on earth should you object to a bald-headed man?"

The pair across the desk from her were mother and daughter. Mrs. Johnson was tall, severe, as forbidding as a battleship. Her daughter, Lydia, was well past thirty, shy, and completely cowed by her mother.

"I assure you I'm completely serious, Miss Burns," Mrs. Johnson said icily. "I simply will not have my Lydia married to a bald-headed man."

With a sigh Carol put her palms over her eyes and pushed her fingers into her blonde hair. Mrs. Johnson had registered her daughter with the Burns Matrimonial Agency six months ago. Since then, Carol had selected three men she thought would make good husbands for Lydia. After meeting the men Mrs. Johnson

had turned thumbs down on all three. And never, in Carol's opinion, for any sound reason.

She took her hands from her eyes and looked at Lydia. If the pair only knew what the three men had thought of Lydia!

She felt a pull of compassion for the girl. She wasn't the most attractive girl in the world, but she was intelligent, sensitive, and would make some man a good wife. But not so long as her mother had anything to say about it. And her mother apparently had erything to say about it.

Carol picked up Lydia's card and tapped it on her gernail. "All right, Missus Johnson, I'll select another prospect. But it may take some time. There's body suitable in my files at the moment."

She held her breath, waiting for the woman's an-
'er. Maybe she would decide to take her daughter to other agency.

But Mrs. Johnson nodded. "That's perfectly all
ght, Miss Burns. We can wait." She got to her feet.
"Come, Lydia."

The girl sent an embarrassed glance at Carol and filed her mother out of the office.

As the door closed behind the pair, Carol let out a
big sigh.

In a release of pent-up temper she picked up a plastic tray from the desk and hurled it at the wall. It fell the floor with a clatter.

As if on signal, the door began to open slowly.

Carol tensed, leaning forward. If Mrs. Johnson was returning . . .

A face crowned with a shock of ~~pure white hair~~ poked around the corner. "Is it safe to come in, my dear?"

Carol relaxed with a laugh. "Cappy! Of course come in. I thought you were that old ~~bald~~ ~~man~~ who just left here."

Captain Jeffers could have been anywhere between fifty and seventy, but he had the trim figure of a man half his age. He carried his tall figure with military bearing. Carol had never learned if the uniform he was official or not, but Captain Jeffers, with his soft voice and flawless manners, always reminded her of the southern colonels she had seen so many times in the movies. Carol had never seen the man, no matter what hour of the day, in anything but evening clothes. He was in a tuxedo now. Close inspection would show a certain shininess, a few frayed spots, but it was spotless, recently pressed.

The man crossed down to her desk. "I gather you are somewhat disturbed, my dear."

Carol said in disgust. "You know what that woman had the nerve to do, Cappy? I found a perfectly good prospect for her daughter, but Missus Johnson turned him down because he's bald. Doesn't she know that many of our most distinguished citizens are as bald as an egg?"

"The idiosyncrasies of mothers are many and strange, my dear."

Carol took out a cigarette and Captain Jeffers, with unfailing courtesy, flicked on his lighter.

"I once knew of a mother whose daughter was a virgin at thirty," the man continued. "Once, only once, the poor girl escaped her mother long enough to have her virginity despoiled. Then, when her despoiler was considerate enough to offer to marry the poor girl, the mother absolutely refused. She said no daughter of hers would ever go to the altar other than immaculate."

"What happened? To the girl, I mean?"

Captain Jeffers said dryly, "To the best of my knowledge, the poor girl is still living with her, a virgin once removed."

Carol whooped with laughter. "You've made my day, Cappy! I was about ready to cut my throat." She set her head in thought. "Did I ask you to drop in today? Or did you drop by on your own?"

The widow from Sioux City?"

Oh, yes! The widow who wants to be escorted through the sin spots of Hollywood. You'll have to give me, Cappy, but I forgot."

He flipped through her file cards for the woman's file. Carol's agency didn't supply escort service except in rare instances, those instances when lonely, middle-aged women came to town and desired an escort they could fully trust. Almost always they were referred to Carol by a former, satisfied client. And that was where Captain Jeffers came in. He augmented his retired Army pay doing escort service for

those rare clients. And that was what it was, a service a goodwill gesture on Carol's part. She accepted no commissions, turning the entire fee over to Captain Jeffers.

She found the card she sought and read off the name of the widow from Sioux City, as well as the name of her hotel. Captain Jeffers jotted the information down in a notebook.

"You'd better be careful, Cappy. I think the widow's looking for a husband," she said with a grin. "She may set a trap for you."

"I have enjoyed the delights of bachelorhood these many years. And I am adroit at recognizing all matrimonial traps. Have no fear." He closed his notebook with a snap. "Good day, my dear."

The man turned with military precision and marched out. Carol mused after him for a moment. She liked Captain Jeffers. She could easily see why marriage-minded, middle-aged widows would be taken with the man. Aside from his courtliness and his grave good looks, there was a scent of virility about him.

And at his age, whatever that might be, Carol thought, *that* was something to be prized.

She picked up Lydia Johnson's file and crossed around behind the screen that concealed her file cabinets. She had a complex set of files. She interviewed each client thoroughly, classifying their personality traits. Fortunately, she had a good memory. The majority of the time, after an interview with a new

client, she could go at once to the file of the male, or female as the case might be, she thought suitable.

She closed the files and went to her desk to tidy it up for the night. It was after four o'clock, and Alice, her receptionist, was gone for the day. It was Carol's habit to come in late in the mornings and stay late in the afternoons. Alice came to work early and left early.

Carol sat down at her desk. But instead of tidying it up at once she lit a cigarette and swiveled around to stare out the window at the home-going river of traffic on Hollywood Boulevard. She was a tall girl, with fine breasts and legs. Her figure was full without being over-ripe and it inescapably attracted male attention. She was fully aware of this fact of life, and for that reason she wore severely tailored suits at the office. It wasn't that she shied away from male attention, but she had early learned it wasn't good public relations for the operator of a matrimonial agency to offer competition for female clients.

She often thought of herself as living a sort of Jekyll-Hyde existence. Away from the office she wore prettily, completely feminine clothes. There was an air of intensity about her, a hint of leashed, explosive energy. And this impression wasn't misleading. She was capable of great concentration and of great outbursts of energy, both mental and physical. And her temper sometimes erupted with the suddenness of a flash-bomb.

She was twenty-five years old.

Now she spun around in the swivel chair with a flash of nylon thigh and snubbed out her cigarette. One of the telephones on her desk rang. She scooped up the receiver and said crisply, "Burns Matrimonial Agency."

"I'm a stranger in town," a deep, familiar voice said. "Just a poor, lonely bachelor. I saw your ad in the Yellow Pages and I . . ."

Carol relaxed with a laugh. "And just what was it you had in mind, sir?"

"I had in mind a sexy blonde with a figure that won't quit."

"I can check my files to see if I have anyone available who fits that description."

"How long would that take?"

"Just what kind of a program did you have in mind?"

The voice said promptly, "The Three-B program . . . a bottle, a bird and a bed!"

"In that order?"

"The order could be reversed."

"In that case there is someone available." She stirred, adding with a note of reproof. "Wilson, you nut, I haven't heard from you in over a week."

"I'm sorry, Burnsie, but I've been tied up. Honest, I have."

Wilson Scott was a young, handsome, corporation lawyer who had been dating Carol for six months. He was charming, great fun on the town, and even greater fun in bed. Carol hadn't thought beyond that,

but she doubted very much that she was in love with him. "All right, Wilson, you needn't sound so apologetic. You're forgiven. This time. When and where will you pick me up?"

"In an hour? At your apartment?"

"Make it two hours. I have to tidy up here first, then scoot home and take a bath."

"Okay, Burnsie, two hours," Wilson said, and hung up.

Carol got busy. She was looking forward with pleasure to the evening with Wilson Scott. The thought of the evening ahead started a pulsing heat through her veins, spreading pleasantly to the rest of her body.

As she came out of the bathroom, the buzzer sounded in the reception room. Someone had just entered. Carol uttered a sound of annoyance. She seriously considered not answering it, but she strode to the door and threw it open. Speaking rapidly, she began, "I'm sorry, but we're closed for the . . ."

The man standing in the middle of the room took a cigarette from his mouth and said mildly, "The door was open."

"I know but . . ." Carol stopped abruptly.

This man was a little different from most men who come to the agency. Mostly they were middle-aged bachelors with half-grown children seeking a companion to help raise them; plain men too shy to find mates the usual way; or bold males blatantly in search of ease and easy sex.

At first glance this man fitted none of these patterns. It was true he had a shy, diffident manner and she halfway expected him to glance down and dig his toes into the carpet. But his features, while not handsome, had a rugged charm. His gray eyes were level and sensitive. His quiet taste in clothes and his intelligent face, gave to him a scholarly air. And he was not middle-aged. She placed his age at about thirty.

Carol said bluntly, "What's your affliction?"

He looked startled. "I beg your pardon?"

She gestured impatiently. "Many people who come to see me, especially men, have something wrong with them. A bald head carpeted with a toupee, false teeth, a wooden leg. And so forth."

The gray eyes darkened, and he stood straighter. "Now just a minute! Do you always greet new clients this way?"

Carol sighed. She ground her hands over her eyes, pushing her fingers up into her hair. After a moment she said, "Of course not. And I'm sorry. This has been a miserable day." She tried a tentative smile. "Suppose we start over, Mister . . . ?"

His gaze held hers for a long while. Then he nodded slowly, as though accepting her apology. A glint of amusement struck his eyes. "Cooper. Virgil Cooper."

"I suppose you came in to register?"

He said dryly, "I had somethin' like that in 'yes.'

She motioned. "Will you step inside, Mister Cooper?"

He hesitated, his flat stare on her.

"Said the spider to the fly?" Carol laughed with an abrupt return of good humor. "It's all right, Mister Cooper. I promise not to eat you."

As he passed close to her, Carol caught a tangy odor, not unpleasant, of pipe tobacco. Inside the office she motioned him to a chair before her desk. Virgil Cooper sat down. He gestured with the unlit pipe. "Do you mind?"

"Not at all. Go right ahead."

While Carol went to her files to get the forms, he tamped tobacco into the bowl of his pipe. But he didn't light it at once.

Carol sat down behind her desk and put a cigarette in her mouth. He struck a kitchen match and held it for her. Then he put the match to his pipe, but he didn't get the tobacco burning. He continued to sit with the cold pipe in his hands, now and then rubbing it between his palms.

Carol arranged the papers in order and said briskly, "Before I register you, I should explain a few things. Unlike many matrimonial bureaus, we don't just take your name, address and the fee and that's it. We inquire into your background extensively. And I have a rather lengthy questionnaire for you to complete. So, if you object on personal grounds, there's no need to go further."

"It sounds like I'm applying for a job." His voice was amused.

"The selection of a mate is just as important as any job!"

"You're right, of course." He shrugged. "I have no objections. Nothing to hide. No skeletons in the closet."

She gave him the proper forms to fill out, which he did dutifully until he came to the list of fifty questions.

Then he sat back, his eyebrows climbing. "Lengthy isn't the word! Are all these questions necessary?"

"I think so. I've had great success with it," Carol said with some pride. "It's a personality questionnaire, designed to match clients who are compatible."

She went on to explain about the five areas of personality covered by the questions: Temperament, sociability, conformity to current social standards, attitude toward sex and religion.

"Then I add up your trait score and give you the names of five of my clients whose trait scores are within a compatible range. After that, you're on your own."

His gaze was appraising. "I must say you're thorough, Miss Burns. I assume it is *Miss Burns*?" Somehow he managed to make the question more than just casual.

"It is. Carol Burns."

He nodded. He ran his glance down the list of ques-

ons. Suddenly he chuckled. "Now this one; 'Do you like to be kissed and caressed?' Well, now I'd have to say that would all depend on who was doing the kissing and the caressing!"

Carol stiffened and said coldly, "Mister Cooper, I spent three years doing research before I compile those questions! If you can't take them seriously . . ."

He glanced up in dismay. "Oh, I *am* sorry. I didn't mean . . . yes, I did, too. And it was a bad joke. Now it's my turn." His smile was sudden and charming. "Shall we go back and start over again?"

TWO

Carol's apartment was in an old building high in the Hollywood Hills. It had once been a lush place, inhabited mostly by silent picture stars, but it had gone to seed. The building hung over the edge of a cliff like an aged face brooding disapprovingly on the changes the years had brought to Hollywood. The apartment was on the top floor and commanded a marvelous view of Greater Los Angeles. Carol had leased the place shortly after her agency began to prosper. The apartment was wholly feminine, designed for comfort and decorated to please the eye. The furniture was modern and expensive, the colors predominantly green and white.

Carol closed the door behind her with a sigh. She kicked off her shoes and walked barefooted to the bar. The interview with Virgil Cooper had thrown her schedule off-kilter and she had less than an hour to get

eady for her date with Wilson Scott. Nonetheless she took time to mix a pitcher of martinis. She poured a double for herself and put the rest in the bar refrigerator. She pulled back the drapes and sat down at the bar, sipping slowly at her drink and gazing out at the view. It was a nightly ritual with her.

It was twilight, and myriad lights were flickering on, singly and in jeweled clusters. It was going to be a nice evening, everything considered. Carol smiled to herself, feeling a sensual heat pulse through her loins as she thought of just how nice it would be. She finished her drink and went into the bedroom. There she stepped out of her clothes and, naked, entered the bathroom.

The one thing she hadn't changed in the apartment was the sunken tub in the bathroom. It was enormous. Each time she used it she felt sinful, sybaritic. She didn't know who the original occupant of the apartment had been, but she liked to think it had been a silent movie star of the slinky, sloe-eyed, siren type who came home each day from doing sexy love scenes with Latin-type screen lovers and immersed herself in the tub in preparation for a real-life scene with her lover.

She started the water in the tub, went down the three steps and tested the water with her toe until it was to her liking. Then she slipped down in it with a soft sigh, and stayed a long time. Finally she got out and towed herself briskly, standing before the full-length mirror on the back of the bathroom door.

Under the vigorous rubbing, her pink and white body began to glow. Her skin tingled, and she felt alive all over. And her thoughts swung, not to Wilson Scott but to Virgil Cooper. She recalled the way his long fingers had stroked the bowl of his pipe. As her mind made the erotic connection, the nipples on her firm breasts came stiffly, tinglingly, erect. Head tilted back, eyes half-closed, she raised her hands and drew her palms lingeringly across the erect nipples. She shivered convulsively, her abdomen contracting.

Then she gave her head a violent shake. She said aloud, derisively, "My God, girl, next you'll be . . ."

Made self-conscious by the sound of her voice, she threw the towel into the hamper. She powdered her glowing body, and made conservative use of a heady perfume.

In the bedroom a glance at the bedside clock told her it was getting late. Wilson Scott was always prompt. It was something of a fetish with him. She began to hurry. She elected blue, one of her favorite colors. Even her bra, panties and half-slip were blue. Over these she drew on a soft, powder-blue sheath.

She was at the bar, sipping a martini, when the doorbell rang. Assuming a bored expression, she strode to the door and threw it open.

"Where have you been?" she demanded.

Involuntarily his glance dropped to his wrist watch. Wilson Scott was slightly chunky with the broad shoulders and sloping arms of an athlete. But Carol knew for a fact that most of his exer-

years at any rate, had been taken in cocktail bars and bedrooms. His complexion was very light, and he suffered from sunburn quite easily. As a result he spent very little time out-of-doors. His thick hair was sandy, his deep-set eyes a light blue. The backs of his blunt, powerful hands were blotched with huge freckles. Carol shivered; she knew the strength of those hands.

Now he glanced up from his watch. In an offended voice he said, "Why, I'm right on time!"

Carol smothered a giggle behind her hand.

"You teasing witch!"

He covered the distance between them in a bound sweeping her into his arms. One hand cupped her head, the blunt fingers tangling in her hair. His other hand dropped to the small of her back, exerting pressure.

She surged against him willing, eagerly, grinding her body against his. His mouth descended on hers. Her lips parted to admit his tongue and she responded to his kiss hungrily. In a moment he'll have me on the bed, she thought hazily. Or the couch. Or the floor. Or whatever is handy.

She tore her mouth away with a gasp. "No, you don't, Wilson Scott! You promised me dinner!"

His breath in her ear was heated. "I said I could reverse the order. All you have to do is ask."

"That was before I got all gussied up. You've already ruined my lipstick." Breathing unevenly she

pushed him away. "I'll buy you one drink. *Then* you're going to take me out to dinner!"

After dinner they went to an intimate nightclub on the edge of the Sunset Strip. The club had a small dance band. Wilson was an excellent dancer, and she loved to dance with him. It was a week night, and the club wasn't particularly crowded. Carol had had enough drinks before dinner to make everything properly hazy. She floated in his arms. He held her close, her body molding into his. His hand on her back felt warm and protective through her dress.

"Let's go home early, Wilson."

"I'm willing. You just give me the word." He pulled his head back to gaze down into her face. His eyes were intense. "You're lovely tonight, Carol. You're the most beautiful woman in this room."

"Why, thank you, sir," she murmured.

"I mean it."

She felt a certain uneasiness. It was unlike him to be so serious. She said lightly, "I know you do, darling. But why so serious?"

"Perhaps it's time we were serious." His voice had a rough edge.

She arched her head back and ran the tip of her tongue into his ear. His arms tightened around her.

During the next orchestra intermission, they were at their table having a drink. Carol's head was bent as she stared pensively into her glass. Out of the corner

of her eye she saw someone stop beside the table.

"Carol dear! It's been a long time, hasn't it?"

Carol tensed at the familiar voice. She glanced up.
"Yes, Myra, it has been a long time. How are you?"

"Fine, dear. I couldn't be better."

Myra Vaughn was tall and thin. Carol knew the woman was at least sixty, and her efforts to hide the years were less successful than the last time Carol had seen her. The heavy makeup failed to hide the tired, aging lines of her face. Her blonde hair had a dim orange cast. She had the intense, small black eyes of a bird. The inevitable cigarette was between her fingers. She stared at Wilson through a screen of smoke.

Myra said archly, "Aren't you going to introduce me, dear?"

"Oh, I'm sorry. Wilson, Myra Vaughn. Wilson Scott, Myra."

Wilson got to his feet quickly, murmuring something.

"How do you do, young man?" Myra laughed.
"My, he's a good-looking one, dear. But then you always did have good taste in men."

A quick flush stained Wilson's features. He sat down, his face turned aside. Carol felt a flash of temper, but she held her tongue.

Then Myra looked down at her. "Dear, I've been meaning to call you. Perhaps we could have lunch together soon?"

Carol's first inclination was to refuse curtly, but there was a strange quality of entreaty about Myra's voice. She said slowly, "I'm pretty busy, Myra, but I—"

"Fine, dear, fine! I'll call you!"

With a flip of her hand Myra was gone. Carol watched as she weaved her way between the tables stopping now and then for a word with someone. With Myra table-hopping was a great art.

Carol said absently, "The last time I saw her, Myra was a brunette."

"What?"

Carol glanced around. "Myra dyes her hair with the changes of the seasons." She gestured apologetically. "That sounds catty, I know, but . . ."

Wilson scowled. "She's got a flip tongue, I'll say that for her!"

Carol laughed. "Oh, that's just Myra's way. She's got a reputation as a character to maintain. Trying to shock people is one way she has of doing it."

Wilson took a pull of his drink. "I thought she wasn't speaking to you?"

"She hasn't been. Not for three years." Carol looked down the room to where Myra was bent over another table, head bobbing up and down like a feeding bird's. "She has something on her mind. And I wish I knew what it was."

The music started up, and Wilson led her out onto

the dance floor. In his arms all thought of Myra Vaughn receded from Carol's mind.

Some time later they were at the table again. Their table was near the small bar; Wilson sat with his back to it. There was only one person at the bar, a chic brunette about Carol's age.

All at once Carol realized that the brunette was staring at their table. Carol met the woman's glance. Her eyes were very black, deep-set and burning. The woman was very attractive in a well-groomed way. Her clothes were expensive and fitted her slim figure perfectly. But she was definitely hostile. Carol was at a loss to understand it. She was positive she had never seen the woman before. As Carol watched, the woman raised her glass to her lips in a sort of silent, mocking toast.

With knitted brows Carol turned to Wilson to ask him if he knew the woman. But she hesitated, feeling a little foolish. When she looked again, the woman was gone. Unaccountably Carol shivered. In a low voice she said, "Wilson, let's go."

On the way to her apartment, riding in Wilson's Buick, Carol sat very close to him, her hand on his thigh. He drove, as he did everything, with all his attention focused on the road. He rarely spoke while he was driving.

And Carol realized, not for the first time, how little she really knew about Wilson Scott. He had told her he was unmarried and that he lived alone in a bachelor

apartment. She had never seen it; he had never asked her there. They had always ended up in her apartment. She hadn't minded before. Somehow that seemed to put their affair on her terms. Maybe that was false reasoning, but it made sense to her.

Now she wondered. He had never mentioned other women. And there must be others. Or had been others once. The woman at the bar, for instance. Could she have been one of them?

"You know something, Wilson?" Carol said. "I've never seen where you live?"

He risked a single, surprised glance at her. "It's nothing to see, believe me. But you've never asked before. Why tonight?"

She shrugged. "No reason. A woman's curiosity, I suppose."

"All right, I'll satisfy your curiosity. But not tonight," he said curtly. "The cleaning woman hasn't been in this week and the place is a mess."

At that moment he pulled the Buick into the curb before Carol's apartment house. Carol let the subject drop. But she made a mental note to bring it ~~up again~~ soon.

Once inside the apartment with Wilson she felt oddly nervous. She went around the ~~Living room~~, switching on all the lights, drawing ~~the~~ ~~curtains~~ closed. And before she knew it, she was repeating her steps, turning off some of the lights. She stopped herself and stood quite still, taking a deep breath. She was

acting as though she'd never been alone with Wilson before. And all because a strange woman had stared at her with hate in her eyes. The woman could very well have been stoned and glaring her hate at the world.

She faced about. "Would you like a drink?"

"No, I wouldn't like a drink." He was standing in the middle of the room, staring at her curiously. "What's the matter with you, Burnsie?"

"I don't know. Nothing, really." She gestured helplessly. "I had a bad day. I guess that's it."

"*You* wanted to come home."

"I know I did."

His eyes began to glow. "Then come here!"

She went to him slowly. She halted a short distance away, still strangely reluctant. Absurdly, the image of Gil Cooper rose to her mind. For a moment she feared she could smell his pipe tobacco.

"Dammit, what's the matter with you?" Wilson growled.

He seized her by the arm, his strong fingers hurting her flesh, and pulled her against him. His mouth was a heavy, demanding weight. She held herself stiff, unyielding, but she felt his hand on her breast, and she experienced a leap of desire. With a soft sigh her mouth opened. She ran her hands up his back under his shirt, delighting in the ripple of powerful muscles in his back and shoulders.

She felt him fumbling with the zipper of her dress.
"Wait, you'll tear it," she whispered.

She moved back in the circle of his arms. Reaching around behind her, she opened the zipper as far as it would go. Wilson took the sleeves of the dress between his fingers and peeled it down her front to the waist. Carol gave a supple twist, and the dress slid to a blue puddle at her feet. Before she could step out of it, he pulled her into his arms again. She took his tongue in her mouth. Wilson's hands moved from her back to the curve of her buttocks. Carol shivered at the whisper of her slip under his ~~slipping fingers~~.

She tore her mouth away and gasped, "I'm your lover, all right! But wait!" With her back to him, she quickly removed the rest of her clothing. Finally she faced around for him to see her.

Wilson was fumbling with the buttons of his shirt. At the sight of her nakedness he grunted explosively and started toward her. Nimbly, she eluded him. She stripped the blanket from the bed and sprawled across it. She watched him through slitted lids. In a moment naked, he joined her on the bed.

He propped himself up on one elbow and loomed over her. Carol took his face between her hands and guided it to her breast. He drew his tongue slowly across a hardening nipple. Carol went rigid, her body leaving the bed. Now he took the nipple between his lips. He worked on it until it was as ~~big~~ ~~as~~ ~~a~~ ~~mossy~~ ~~stone~~. His hands were busy ~~all~~ ~~over~~ ~~her~~.

He was familiar enough with her body by this to know just where to touch her. Within minutes Carol's body was pitching and rolling in animal passion. Her hips were in constant motion. Her breathing was agitated; her heart thundered in her breast. She was throbbing with denied sensation. She felt in danger of exploding if denied any longer.

She drew his face up to hers. "Now, lover, now," she whispered fiercely and drove her tongue deep into his mouth.

Wilson obeyed the frantic urging of her hands and their bodies flowed into the frenzied rhythms of heated love. Wave after wave of scalding pleasure rolled over Carol, drowning her in ecstasy. She lay and fell with him, meeting his every move with hers. If her own. As a final convulsion gripped her, she rose to meet him, her strident cry of completion ringing across the room.

After a while, she heard the rasp of a match, the flare of light as he lit a cigarette. She wanted a cigarette, but she didn't ask for one. She lay with her face turned away.

In a short while she felt him leave the bed and heard the rustle of his clothing as he dressed. There was something a little furtive about his movements. It was always like this. Each time he took her to bed, he seemed so eager to flee afterwards, as though driving away some unnamed guilt.

Shortly, she heard his whisper, "Good night, Bumble."

Then he was gone.

When the door closed behind him, Carol found it hard to sleep. Her thoughts swung back to Myra Vaughn. It was very strange that Myra should seek her out after all the time that had passed . . .

Carol hadn't the least idea. She shook her head, her temper stirring at the thought of this strange woman digging into her private life without so much as an apology.

But obviously Myra expected no answer to her question, for she rattled on, "I've gone through I don't know how many girls since I started this business. They take the job and then spend all their time watching out for the first eligible male, then pick him out for themselves. The first thing I know they're up and married. And I'm out a client *and* an employee!"

"I don't have any plans for getting married anytime soon," Carol said stiffly.

"Good, good!" Myra bobbed her head rapidly. Her heavily made-up face cracked in another grin. "I know what you're thinking . . . why don't I hire some bag as old as me and twice as ugly? I've tried that. It doesn't work, either. The minute a good-looking man comes in here and is greeted by some ancient battle-axe, he doesn't come back a second time. Probably figures if she's a sample of the goods, he's not buying. A man likes to see a juicy rump he can pinch. Or a breast, if that's the female anatomy toward which he's so inclined."

Carol left Myra's office slightly dazed but with instructions to report for work the next morning. She accepted the job as an adventure, without the least idea of staying more than a few months at the most.

She worked for Myra Vaughn for over two years

thought that most clients of a matrimonial bureau were men; mostly from the lower income, least educated group. She couldn't have been more wrong. The people registered with Myra were male three to one, it was true, but they were, in the main, of income level close to ten thousand and a great many were professional people. And while it was also true that many of them were middle-aged or older, there was an amazing number under thirty. It wasn't long before Carol reached the conclusion that the main problem confronting most of them was the lack of opportunity for meeting people of similar tastes who were also interested in marriage.

From the beginning, Carol had never approved of Myra indiscriminately accepting any and all who applied for membership. Myra's only requirement was that each new member have the registrars name. Carol was convinced they should, and could, do better. She was equally certain there was more to pairing off couples than just reaching into a hat and pulling out five names of the same approximate age of each new member.

Quietly Carol went about working out a plan. After a year of testing different systems of matching clients, she found one that had caught on. The silly method was the one where two people of the same age were paired off, as, for instance, if the woman were of a determined age, the man would be of a similar age.

party-goer, the other a stay-at-home. In a few cases she even watched closely those couples who, in her judgement, were incompatible and yet married anyway. In the majority of instances they were divorced within a year.

Selecting and experimenting, she formulated her set of questions. Without Myra's knowledge she tried the questions on a few clients and found the results satisfactory. In the end she had a list of fifty questions covering the five character traits she considered the most important. For six months she tried them secretly. For the first time she was grateful that Myra seldom appeared at the office. But the results were so exciting that, finally, she could no longer keep her secret to herself.

She asked Myra to drop by the office one afternoon. Two hours later Myra sailed in behind a screen of smoke, talking the moment she came through the door.

"Well, dear, what's the crisis?"

Carol refused to be hurried. She gestured. "Sit down, Myra. I just thought it's time we had a little talk."

Myra's face tightened at the tone of Carol's voice. She sat down gingerly, perching on the edge of her chair. She said with a little laugh, "This sounds serious, dear. What's it about? A raise?"

Carol shook her head. "Nothing like that." She locked her hands together in her lap and leaned forward tensely. "Myra, since ~~you were working for~~

you, the enrollment has increased forty per cent. Isn't that correct?"

"That's right, Carol, and don't think I don't appreciate it," Myra said quickly. "I've been thinking about a fat raise . . ."

"No, Myra, that's not it," Carol broke in impatiently. "That's not what I want to talk about. I'm not happy with the way we enroll every Jack and Jill who comes in. I've given it a lot of thought and I think I've worked out something. Here, let me show you . . ."

Before Myra could object Carol jumped up and came around the desk with the folder holding her material, the list of questions and the scanty statistics she had gathered so far. Speaking with suppressed excitement, she explained it swiftly. Myra listened closely but, almost from the beginning, Carol could feel the woman's resistance. Carol talked faster, more animatedly, but when she was done she knew that she had failed to convince Myra.

The woman frowned at her, for once without a cigarette. "Surely you're not serious, dear!"

"But I am! I was never more serious in my life!"

"You can't be! This . . ." Myra handled the folder as though it contained a ticking bomb. "This is ridiculous!" She laughed in Carol's face.

Hands clenched, not trusting herself to speak, Carol rode around the desk and sat down.

Still laughing, Myra said, "I'm sorry, dear. I can see how much work you've put in on this but if you'd

have come to me before going to all this trouble . . .

Fighting her temper, Carol covered her eyes, digging her fingers into her hair. Finally she glanced to say carefully, "Myra, in effect I'm a silent partner in this business. I do all the work of the office while you . . . well, do whatever you do. It comes down to that."

"That's right, it does," Myra agreed readily.

"Then why can't I have a say in running it?" Carol cried.

"Because it won't work, that's why. People come here looking for a mate, not to answer a bunch of silly questions!" Myra took a deep breath, then went on more slowly. "Dear, I've been in this business most of my life. And you work here for just two years and then you try to tell me how to run it!"

The woman's face, rouged like a clown's mask, was tightly clenched as a fist. Carol stared at her intently for a long moment.

Finally she said quietly, "Myra, I insist on having a say in how things are done."

"You will, dear, you will! I promise you that. You know what I've been thinking? I've watched you and you're doing fine. Pretty soon I'll retire into the background and then I'll make you a full partner."

"No, Myra," Carol said stonily. "That's not good enough. I want to try out this plan of mine. Now! Not later!"

Myra sighed. "You know your trouble? You're an idealist, a dreamer. You've worked out this hare-

brained scheme and you think you can manage people's lives with it. No, dear, I'm sorry. I can't let you ruin the business I've worked so hard to build up."

Carol surged to her feet. "Then I'm quitting!"

Myra sagged. "I had hoped I'd finally found . . ." Her voice trailed off. For a moment she looked quite old and weary. Then she straightened, lit a cigarette and said briskly, "I can't stop you, dear."

"Not only that but I'll start an agency of my own!"

Myra's face emerged from the smoke. Her eyes were bright and hard. "Now that's something I'd like to see." She laughed harshly. "You do that and you'll starve to death."

"We'll see, Myra, we'll see," Carol said tightly. She swept her purse from the desk and stormed out of the office.

That was the last time the two women met face to face until Myra came to Carol's table in the nightclub.

someone came in. Thinking it was Alice return-
-ly, Carol crossed to the door and opened it.

Sergeant Ben Crowley of the Los Angeles Bu-
-nd was plodding toward her across the recep-
-ion.

"Why, sergeant!" she cried. As always, she fe-
-taining of apprehension whenever she saw the
-nt. "Isn't it a little early for you?"

"Morning, Burns," Crowley growled. "I know
-ly, but I'd like a word with you. Don't worry."
-ned faintly. "It's nothing to get concer-
-nt."

"Why, certainly, sergeant," she said with a feel-
-relief. She threw the door wide. "Come on
-fee's about done. You can have a cup with me."

Crowley followed her inside. He sat down
-ited patiently while she poured him a cup
-fee.

Sergeant Ben Crowley was a lean, dour individ-
-middle age with the face of a dyspeptic horse:
-nical brown eyes. He had been on the force
-irly twenty years.

When Carol was again seated behind her de-
-owley said, "The department got a phone call yester-
-day, anonymous of course, that there was a con-
-rking out of your agency. I've got orders to check it out."

"Any names?"

"No, Burns. No names. There almost never is w-

these calls." The man shrugged. "Any new ~~men~~
lately?"

"Of course, sergeant. Let's see . . . when did ~~you~~

get interested in the mail. She pushed it aside for later. She poured a fresh cup of coffee, lit a cigarette and sat back in thought.

Sergeant Crowley represented only one of the many problems that had confronted her when she made her decision to open her own agency.

The first thing, naturally, had been financing. But she had saved enough for two months' office rent, enough for a few newspaper advertisements, *et cetera*. After that she operated from month to month on a rock-bottom budget until she slowly pulled ahead.

Carol's musings were interrupted by the arrival of her receptionist. Alice was a petite redhead of twenty-three, as cute as a bunny, and as empty-headed, Carol sometimes thought. Alice was eternally cheerful, friendly and had a sympathetic ear. All new members, male and female, took to her at once.

Mindful of Myra's remarks concerning her difficulty in keeping secretaries, Carol had employed a girl who was both pretty and unavailable. Alice was happily married to a medical student, and Carol was reasonably sure of her services at least until her husband got his degree.

"Good morning, Carol," Alice chirped. She was bright and gay in a white, fluffy blouse and a yellow pleated skirt that Carol felt certain had taken the girl hours to iron the night before.

Carol gazed at her sourly. "Is it?"

Alice's dark eyes widened. "Goodness, aren't we grumpy this morning!"

"The sergeant was in bright and early."

"That man! Why can't he leave us alone?"

Alice's habitual use of plural pronouns when talking of the agency often irritated Carol. She snapped, "He has a job to do!"

"I know, but goodness! You'd think he took us for criminals or something." The last words were spoken back over her shoulder as Alice went into the outer office, closing the door gently behind her. She was accustomed to Carol's morning moods and knew when to retreat.

Carol brooded after her for a moment. The girl's secretarial ability was questionable, and she filed with all the finesse of a pack rat. But she was a fine receptionist and a good interviewer. And Carol's fine memory made unnecessary the employment of a good file clerk.

All at once Carol laughed aloud. Wouldn't Sergeant Crowley have been surprised to hear her defending him!

She opened Virgil Cooper's file and rapidly scanned the data she'd gotten from him the afternoon before. As she calculated his trait score, she mentally compared it with her own. Their differential was sixteen points. Highly incompatible! Not, she told herself acidly, that she had any thoughts of marrying him.

But the comparing of her own trait score with that of a new male member was an old game with her.

Quickly she went over the other information he had given her about himself. He was an artist and

earned just under ten thousand dollars a year. He hadn't specified what kind of an artist but, from his earnings, she felt safe in assuming he was a commercial artist. Any serious painter making that kind of money would be well-known. He had a college education, was twenty-nine years old and had never been married.

When she was finished with reading the material on him, she went to the files behind the screen. He had a noon-hour appointment, and he would be wanting the five names she had promised him. Here her memory was a great help. Ordinarily the matching of name for name was a painstaking, involved process. But within minutes Carol had selected five names from the hundred in her files, five names of women whose personality trait scores fell within a few points of Virgil Cooper's. With Sergeant Crowley's warning still fresh in her mind, Carol hesitated over one name for a long time.

Carla Mantel.

Carla was a flamboyant girl. At twenty-three she had been already married and divorced twice. She had been registered with the Burns Agency for a year, and Carol had just about given up finding her a husband. Carla was a very wealthy woman, a prime target for an enterprising fortune-hunter. But her personality score more nearly matched Virgil C. of the five.

With a shrug Carol included Carla's

Virgil Cooper was thirty minutes late for his appointment. He hurried in out of breath and shyly apologetic.

Taking his unlit pipe from his mouth, he said, "I'm sorry I'm late but I was held up . . ."

Carol waved away his explanation. "There's no need to apologize to me, Mister Cooper. My schedule isn't that full. But I do hope you'll make an effort to be punctual with my other people. Most people who register with me are shy about meeting strangers. Many procrastinate and are late for their first date, sometimes never showing up at all. I'm sure you can see what a bad first impression that makes."

"I'm sorry. I'll do my best not to—"

"I can assure you that the girls you'll be meeting are just as apprehensive about that first meeting as you will be."

"You made your point, Miss Burns. I'll try to be prompt."

Carol felt her face burn. She glanced away in some confusion. What was it about this man that should always upset her so and cause her to rattle on like an idiot? With a show of briskness she picked up the name cards she had selected for him. She looked up to find him studying her curiously.

"You don't like me; do you, Miss Burns?" he asked evenly.

"I make it a point never to like or dislike my clients," she said sharply. "I learned long ago that it wasn't good for my business."

"Don't you find that rather hard to do?"

"I manage, Mister Cooper, I manage," she said tartly. She held out the cards. "Here are the five names."

His gaze still on her, he took the cards. Finally he looked down at the cards and thumbed through them rapidly.

The cards had only names, phone numbers, age, occupation and a thumbnail physical description.

"You'll notice I withheld the addresses. That will come later. If a woman wishes you to know her address, that is her decision to make."

He glanced up. "There's no salary information, no financial rundown at all."

"No, Mister Cooper, there isn't. And you won't get that information from me," she said coldly. Unbidden, the memory of Crowley's early morning visit flooded her mind again.

His look was baffled. "But I don't understand . . ."

"My services are for husband and wife seekers, not fortune-hunters. The finances of my clients are classified information. That includes yours as well. For your further information, several of my women clients are very wealthy. But don't expect me to tell you which ones."

"Now wait! You can't think I'm a fortune-hunter!"

"Can't I?"

He looked upset. "I can see why you might think

that from what I just said. It was a stupid question. I'm sorry."

His gray eyes asked for understanding. Carol returned his look without yielding. Finally she said crisply, "If that's all, Mister Cooper, it's my lunch hour."

He grinned suddenly. "Look, Miss . . . Carol, don't you think we can knock off the Mister Cooper bit? Call me Virgil. I won't mind."

Carol said nothing.

"And I haven't had lunch, either. Could I—"

"Mister Cooper, I never mix socially with my clients," she said stonily. It was a lie, but there was no reason he should know differently.

"If that's the way it is." It was a question, not a statement, as though he was trying to give her a chance to change her mind.

"That's the way it is."

He fidgeted for a moment. He shuffled his feet and put the cold pipe in his mouth, then took it out and stared at it in distaste. His features tightening, he said, "Good day, Miss Burns."

He spun on his heel and went out. Carol watched him go with a growing feeling of uneasiness. He *couldn't* be as shy as he appeared. Actually shuffling his feet. It had to be an act. If he got his hooks into Carla Mantel and learned how wealthy she was . . .

She should get Carla's card back. Carol opened her mouth to call him back, but it was too late. He was gone, the office door closed after him.

She fought down a rising panic. Without thought she came to her feet quickly. She gathered her things together and hurried into the outer office.

Alice glanced up from her desk. "What was wrong with him? He flew out of here like a swarm of hornets was after him!"

Without halting her headlong progress, Carol said, "I have to go downtown to police headquarters, Alice. The sergeant wanted me to check some mug pictures. I may be gone most of the afternoon."

FIVE

Carol's hunch about Myra Vaughn proved correct. The woman called a few mornings later and asked Carol out to lunch. She was friendly but non-committal on the telephone. Carol accepted largely out of curiosity. It was clear Myra had something on her mind. She must have since it was the first Carol had heard from her in three years, except for the ~~lunch~~ meeting in the nightclub which had been ~~arranged~~. Or had it?

Typically Myra chose a well-known ~~club~~ on Vine Street. By slipping the ~~hostess~~ a bill, she got a booth near the front door. The ~~hostess~~ was busy with their booth, people in recording. It was ~~dark~~ now and then a lesser-known ~~hostess~~ would pass by. Myra had a flutter of hands, a ~~glance~~ that was ~~enough~~ for anyone who deigned to stop.

As they waited for their first martini, Myra chirped brightly, "How have things been, Carol dear?"

"Fine, Myra. Just fine, as I told you the other night."

"So you did," Myra said absently, her gaze roaming the room. Her hair was the same shade of orange as before. Her glance finally came to rest again on Carol. "I've been hearing wonderful things about your work. Congratulations, dear."

"Thank you, Myra." It was all Carol felt safe to say. She very much wanted to shout, *I told you so!* But she held herself in check.

"And that nice young man with you the other night? One of your people?"

"No, Myra. I told you," Carol said with some annoyance. "Just a friend."

Myra said slyly, "Just a friend?"

"That's all. I never go out with a man registered with my agency."

Myra's thin brows knitted. "Is he someone I know? His face seemed familiar."

"I don't think so, Myra. He's not in show business. He's a lawyer." Carol added with deliberate malice, "He's a corporation lawyer, not criminal, so I'm sure you wouldn't know him."

If Myra took offense, she hid it well. But then, Carol recalled, Myra had the hide of an elephant.

The drinks came, and Myra sucked at hers greedily. In a short while she grew more relaxed. She caught

the attention of a waitress and ordered another drink. Carol refused a second drink and asked for a ~~free~~ instead.

Whatever Myra had in mind, it was plain she was in no hurry to reveal it. Carol was weary of the ~~spur~~ ring, but she resolved to wait the woman out. No matter what Myra's purpose, Carol could only see it ending in an argument. The least she could do was get a free lunch out of it.

She ordered a clear soup, a small salad and a ~~small~~ sandwich. Myra ordered only a luncheon salad and had a third martini before it came. The ~~drinks~~ hit reached her, bringing the color to her cheeks and more animation to her speech. She ate with ~~delight~~ birdlike motions. Still nothing she said revealed her motive in asking Carol to lunch. Her talk was of the celebrities she knew, talk peppered with anecdotes of parties and nightclub gatherings. She smoked three cigarettes while she ate, taking a pull on a cigarette between bites of salad. No wonder she's so ~~sorely~~ Carol thought; all those cigarettes must completely destroy her appetite.

Myra's chatter was of little interest to Carol and she listened with only a part of her mind, her attention devoted to eating. She had about concluded that Myra had simply wanted to visit after all.

Finally the woman leaned back with a soft sigh, lighting a fresh cigarette. From behind a screen of smoke, she said abruptly, "I was ~~wrong~~ ~~about~~ you

scheme for matching couples. I'm sorry, dear, for the things I said that day."

Carol felt a leap of elation but she held still, her gaze guarded. Myra went on. "You were the best I ever had working for me. I've been looking ever since for someone capable enough to take over for me. But I haven't found anyone."

Carol sensed what was coming, but she couldn't resist her small moment of triumph first. She said swiftly, "Then you're willing to admit that the system I worked out isn't just an idiot's dream?"

"Did I say that? Of course I admit it, dear. I was wrong," Myra said with a flutter of hands. She smiled ruefully. "I'll further admit that I've tried to imitate you, but my poor brain isn't up to it. And I haven't been able to hire anyone else who can."

"And I'm drawing people away from your agency?"

Myra fidgeted. She smiled palely. Her reluctance was evident. "My business has fallen off fifty percent in these last two years," she finally admitted.

"And now you want me to come back to work for you. Is that it, Myra?"

"Not exactly, dear. I wouldn't ask you to give up all that you've worked for." Myra coughed behind her hand. "My offer is this . . . we'll be partners, combine the two agencies. Everything fifty-fifty."

"And we could use my compatibility tests?" Carol asked. "You'll be the silent partner, nothing more?"

Myra's head emerged from the smoke like a genie's,

her features glowing with pathetic eagerness. "Anything you say, dear."

Carol lit a cigarette. She let the silence build deliberately. And then she experienced a distaste for what she was doing to this woman. She said flatly, "No, Myra."

The hope drained out of Myra's face, leaving it gray and stricken. She whispered, "Please! Before you—"

"No, Myra," Carol broke in. "I'm doing very well by myself, thank you, and I want it to stay that way."

Myra was seized by a coughing spell. With a trembling hand she reached for a glass of water and drank thirstily.

Watching her, Carol no longer felt triumphant. With sudden empathy she sensed something of what the woman must be feeling. Myra had always had an active fear of age and now it was upon her. She had neither children nor a husband. Carol had heard the rumor that Myra had been married at least four times. Myra certainly believed in that old adage, *Don't do as I do, do as I say!*

Now Myra faced old age alone. In addition, she was being threatened with economic disaster. It mattered little whether or not Carol was responsible or Myra's own slip-shod business methods. For years she had received a good income from her bureau with a minimum of effort. Now even that was in jeopardy.

All this Carol sensed and more. She felt a stir of pity. She said gently, "I'm sorry, Myra. But it could

never work out, you and me. We're just not . . ." A burst of laughter escaped her. "We're just not compatible."

Myra bristled at the sound of Carol's laughter. Her voice thick with fury, she snapped, "Don't laugh at me, damn you! I asked you here to make you a business proposition and you laugh at me!"

"Oh, I *am* sorry, Myra. I didn't mean it that way," Carol said, genuinely contrite.

Unheeding, Myra rushed on, "I won't be laughed at. What's more, don't think because I asked you to join me that I—" Her voice rose. "I'll break you! I'll run you out of business. You think you're so almighty smart since you latched onto some gimmick you can sell to the suckers. You'll find out there's more than one gimmick in this business!"

Uncomfortably aware of the heads turning at the sound of Myra's strident voice, Carol said quietly, "Please, Myra . . . you're making a scene."

Myra began to pound on the table with her water glass. Her eyes burned with venom. "You listen to what I'm telling you, you split-tailed bitch! I'll ruin you! I'll—"

In a burst of temper Carol slapped the woman across the mouth with the back of her hand. "That'll be enough, Myra!"

Myra sagged back into the booth, her mouth gaping foolishly. As if in slow motion, one hand came up to feel her mouth.

Carol leaned across the table to whisper tensely,

"You take your best shot, Myra. I'll manage somehow."

She surged to her feet. She started away, then stopped and came back. She fumbled in her purse, berating herself for the sting of tears behind her eyes. She slapped a ten dollar bill onto the table.

"Here's for the lunch, Myra. I don't want to be in your debt. Not now, not ever!"

And she swept out of the restaurant blind to the curious eyes following her progress. Behind her Myra was coughing hoarsely.

That evening Carol had a date with Wilson Scott. As she soaked in her bath, her blonde head floating disembodied on a sea of bubbles, her thoughts reverted to the lunch hour with Myra. Her anger was gone now. She felt only compassion and a certain shame for her part in creating an unpleasant scene. If she hadn't toyed with Myra, giving her reason to hope, she might not have flown into such a rage. As for the woman's threat . . .

Carol dismissed the threat with a shrug of her mind.

And then, abruptly, her thoughts swung to Virgil Cooper. It had been three days since she'd given him the cards and she hadn't seen him since. Her trip to police headquarters had been a waste of time, Virgil's picture wasn't on file. But that didn't mean, as Sergeant Crowley had often told her of confidence, that Virgil wasn't on the prowl for a rich wife.

And he had been out with Carla Mantel. Carla had

called her, titillated with the "new man" Carol had sent her.

"He's a dreamboat, darling," Carla had gurgled in her throaty voice. "I've never known any of the shy type. I guess there's something about me that scares them off!"

Scares them off is right, Carol thought grimly. In the presence of a man, any man, Carla, who was red-haired and sultry and as leggy as a chorus girl, flaunted sex as blatantly as any whore. But this, Carol had to admit, was her own, her female, opinion. Most males referred to Carla as "earthy."

"You be careful, Carla," Carol had warned. "Don't go blabbing about your fat bank account."

"Oh, I will be careful, darling. Aren't I always? But I like him. He makes me goose-pimply all over. One look out of those bedroom eyes of his and what else can I think about but bed?"

With a snort Carol cut short her recollection of the phone conversation with Carla. She got out of the sunken tub and began toweling her pink and white body.

With a sense of sudden shock she realized she had been thinking of Carla's dreamboat as "Virgil!" And, unbidden, the image of the man's slender hands stroking the bowl of his pipe rose to her mind.

She snorted again, indelicately. And then she realized something else, something much more immediate. She was applying the rough towel unduly long to her breasts. The nipples were erect as thumbs, throbbing

with desire. With a shiver she clutched her naked thighs together.

Then, with a sound of disgust, she straightened up and threw the towel into the corner of the bathroom. She was as bad as Carla! One thought of Virgil Cooper and she was ready to be bedded.

It was getting late. She hurried her dressing to be ready in time for Wilson.

SIX

Carol steered Wilson away from the Sunset strip. She knew that was Myra's night time habitat, and she didn't want a renewal of the luncheon brawl. Wilson was roughly handsome in a dark suit, and Carol was supple in a skin-tight blue sheath with ensemble to match. They made a striking couple, Carol adding herself with a touch of smugness.

Wilson was unusually quiet, his face set in sullenness. Since Carol had had enough trouble for one day, she didn't feel like sharing his, so she refrained from asking the reason for his mood.

They had a quiet dinner on La Cienga. Carol had three before-dinner drinks in an effort to brighten up the evening. But nothing seemed to help. All her attempts at conversation only drew monosyllables from Wilson. The evening wasn't beginning at all well.

After dinner they went to a Wilshire Boulevard hotel and caught a floor show. Afterwards, they danced. At first Wilson was stiff on the dance floor, his movements robot-like and hard to follow. But gradually he relaxed. He began to move to the rhythm of the music. With Wilson relaxed they, as always, danced well together. The three drinks before dinner had left Carol a trifle lightheaded. She gave herself up to the music. She relaxed against Wilson's body and followed his lead effortlessly. The room, the other couples on the floor, became a blur on the edge of her consciousness and then almost ceased to exist. She heard only the music and felt only the hard male body next to hers. It was after the fourth dance, after they returned to their table, that Carol saw the brunette again. She was sitting alone a short distance away, partially hidden behind a palm trunk.

As on the other time, the woman sat behind Wilson. For a moment it didn't quite register on Carol. The pale, narrow features and the expensive clothes plucked at her memory. And then the burning eyes came up to meet hers. Carol recoiled, sucking in her breath, as she remembered.

Wilson glanced up at the sound she made. She must have shown her fright, for his face registered immediate concern. If it *was* fear she felt. Carol was certain of one thing: the woman's appearance and her baleful regard was cause enough for apprehension. There was no longer any doubt in Carol's mind. The woman was watching one of them or both.

Wilson's freckled hand came out to cover hers. "What is it? What's wrong, Burnsie?"

Her voice pitched low, Carol said, "Wilson, do you know that woman?"

He tensed, his hand closing painfully around hers. "Where? What woman?"

"The one staring at us—three tables behind you."

Without any attempt at concealment Wilson twisted around to look at the brunette. The woman's gaze never wavered. But her pale face twitched in something that could have been amusement.

Wilson looked at her for a long time. When he faced around again, he refused to meet Carol's gaze. His face was without expression. He didn't say a word.

"Well? Do you?" Carol demanded.

"Do I know her? No, why should I?" His voice was harsh. "I never saw her before in my life."

"But I . . ." Carol broke off, nonplused. Without knowing why or how she knew, she was positive he was lying. But why should he be? It didn't make any kind of sense. Before she could decide whether or not to accuse him of it, Wilson clamped a hand around her wrist and stood up, hauling her up with him.

"Let's get out of here. I'm sick of this place."

Carol caught the undertone of barely controlled violence in his voice. As he pulled her along with him, she looked back over her shoulder into the flaming, somehow accusing, eyes of the brunette. Carol actually felt a sense of relief as she passed through the door-

way of the ballroom into the long hallway outside. She had to hurry to keep up with Wilson's lunging strides.

In front of her apartment door Carol debated asking him in. She wasn't sure she liked him very much in his present mood. He had driven from the Wilshire hotel in brooding silence, cutting in and out of traffic with ruthless but frightening competence. But Wilson resolved the question for her. As she opened her door and started to turn to him, he brushed past her and on into the apartment.

Carol clicked on the lights, saying tartly, "Well, now that you're in, you might as well have a nightcap."

He didn't answer. He stood glowering at her from under lowered brows.

Carol shrugged and crossed to the bar. Wilson paced restlessly while she poured the drinks. He took his and downed it with a toss of his head.

Temper stirred in her. "I don't know what's the matter with you tonight, Wilson, but whatever it is I don't like it."

He set his glass down and caught her arm, his fingers biting cruelly as he pulled her against him. His mouth swooped down. There was a savagery about his embrace she had never felt before. He had always been rough with her and she had rather liked it, but his violence now was frightening—deep within her, she felt a rising response.

He held her mouth captive until she had to fight for breath. Finally she tore her face away. "What brought this on?" she gasped.

His grin was raw, primitive, his lips peeling back from his teeth. "You talk too damned much, Burnsie."

He reached for her again. His breath was hot, heaving, on her bare shoulders. His fingers dug into her flesh like talons. Then she felt them fumbling with the buttons down the back of the dress.

"Wait, damn you! This is a new dress and you'll ruin it!"

But his eyes were glazed with lust, and she knew nothing she had said penetrated. Somehow she managed to squirm and twist, all within his tight embrace, until the dress fell in a blue puddle around her feet. Underneath, she wore a bra, panties and a garter belt. Wilson hooked his thumb in the brassiere strap and ripped it loose. Her freed breasts rose, full and wonderfully tipped.

For a few silent moments she tried to fight free of him. Then his mouth found a nipple, and she was lost. With a soft moan she collapsed against him. Her teeth nipped at his ear as he buried his face in the hollow of her shoulder.

He began urging her toward the couch.

"Wait . . . the bedroom!" Carol cried.

But the sound of her voice was drowned in the great roaring in her ears. And then they were on the couch, with Wilson sprawled against her. Remotely she heard her panties tear and felt a breath of cool air

on her thighs, followed by the sandpaper rasp of his hands along the soft flesh of her inner thighs. Without thinking she arched her body to meet his.

He didn't take time to remove his clothes. He took her with a savagery she hadn't before experienced from him. Buttons and zippers dug into her body and the rough material of his trousers scratched her flesh. Then they were locked together, moving, and she was submerged in smothering waves of pleasure. She rose and fell with him, her fingers clawing at his back for support.

Their mutual frenzy mounted to an almost unbearable pitch. She heard a voice rise in a thin, high wail of entreaty and knew it was her own. Then she felt Wilson's body go rigid in her arms, and she clung desperately to him as the final shudder of ecstasy claimed her.

When it was done, she lay in an exhausted sprawl, still in the garter belt and hose and, ridiculously, one high-heeled shoe.

Wilson scrambled away from her and began straightening his clothes without looking at her.

She stared at his profile with narrowed eyes. The displeasure she had felt toward him earlier returned full force. Why, he had practically raped her! Well, not quite, she admitted ruefully. She had cooperated to a certain degree. But as far as he was concerned, it had been nothing but rape. She felt degraded and resentful.

It was this knowledge that Wilson had used her

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It was this knowledge that Wilson had used to

body on which to spend his anger and violent that prompted her to say, "You *do* know that won don't you, Wilson?"

She saw him stiffen. "We're back to that?"

"Yes, we're back to that!" she said harshly.

Now he glanced over at her. His strange an seemed to have vanished. Now he looked sim weary. "I told you once that I didn't."

"And I don't believe you!" she flared.

"Why should I lie about it?"

"I don't know. That's what I want to find out!"

"You know your trouble, Burnsie? You're damned nosey," he said roughly. "You're so used sticking your nose into the personal lives of those starved freaks who go to you that you think it gi you the right to pry into mine, too."

Carol sat up. She was suddenly shaking with fu "They're not freaks! And if you think that of r why don't you stop coming around?"

Now his own anger surfaced. "You know son thing else? I've been thinking of doing just that. A this seems to be the time. So why don't we just c this a farewell party and be done with it?"

In an explosion of rage Carol flew across the cou at him, her nails reaching for his face. Wilson was t quick for her. He stood up with a lithe movement. I caught her by the shoulders and forced her back in the corner of the couch.

"Good-bye, Burnsie. And I won't be back," he sa quietly, turning away.

Before she could scramble up, he was gone, striding quickly toward the door. Her other shoe had fallen off onto the couch; frantically she groped for it. Finding the shoe, she reared up on her knees and threw it. But she was too late. The shoe clattered against the closing door and fell to the floor. The slam of the door had a sound of finality. It was clear he meant what he said. He wouldn't be back.

Well, after tonight, she couldn't care less!

And yet, as her rage ebbed away, a feeling of emptiness, of desolation, swept through her. She sank into a huddle on the couch and stared at the closed door through a mist of tears. A thought struck her forcibly. He had never directly answered her accusation that he had lied about knowing the brunette with the burning eyes.

SEVEN

Carla Mantel called Carol early the next morning. The conversation was far from satisfactory. The scene with Wilson the night before was still on Carol's mind, and she was astonished to hear Carla's voice so early in the morning. It had always been her impression that Carla seldom arose before noon. But the reason for this was soon clear—Carla hadn't been to bed yet.

As was her habit on the telephone, Carla talked as though anything she said needed no explanation. "Carol, sweetie," she began in her throaty voice. "How can I ever thank you? How can I ever thank you enough?"

"Well, it might help if I had some inkling as to why I'm being thanked," Carol said dryly.

"For sending that divine man to me, sweetie! What?"

Alice hadn't been exaggerating as to their looks. Both newcomers would have easily qualified as beauty contest entrants. One was blonde, tall and shapely, the other dark, petite and shapely. A contrast in dark and light. And both were not much more than twenty, but this was something that no longer surprised Carol. At one time she would have thought no good-looking woman under thirty would ever go to a matrimonial agency. But she had soon learned that she had to be as cautious as a bartender, sometimes going so far as to ask for proof of age.

the next day for the five nannies each they were entitled to.

With some trepidation she watched the two stride out, rumps swinging provocatively. If ever she had seen girls exuding bold invitations by just walking, these two were about as inviting as the law allowed.

Maybe she had made a mistake enrolling them. But she wasn't a monitor of morals, either. She would keep an eye on them. She had enrolled the wrong people before, but it didn't take long to catch her mistakes and get rid of them.

She pushed all thought of the pair from her mind and returned to work.

At noon she was still wrestling with the problem of what to do about Carla. Several times she had pulled the phone to her and started to dial Sergeant Crowley at Headquarters. But something stayed her each time. Aside from the fact that she would be doing Virgil a grave injustice if she were wrong, she simply couldn't convince herself that the man was what she feared he was.

Which was very logical, she thought with a wry grimace. And yet it would be unfair if she condemned him so readily.

And then, just past noon, the desk phone rang. Alice said, "Mister Cooper is here to see you, Carol."

Carol relaxed with a faint sigh. She said, "Have him come in, Alice."

Virgil strolled in. He greeted her with his quiet

smile. He was in a tweed jacket and slacks. As always, Carol caught the tangy scent of his pipe tobacco.

She launched her attack. "I understand you dated Carla Mantel last night?"

He took the pipe from his mouth, his gray eyes twinkling with amusement. "Is that a statement or a question?"

She stared at him narrowly. Finally she said coldly, "A statement, I guess, since Carla called me and told me. And I'm sure she'll tell of this conversation, too, as she does everything else."

He didn't rise to the bait. He simply returned her stare, his eyes opaque. Then he glanced away, ducking his head shyly.

Carol felt a flash of temper. It had to be an act. It simply had to be!

She said tightly, "Just what is it you wanted?"

His smile broke, the strong teeth like ivory in his face. "I'm sorry. I just happened to be in the neighborhood and I thought maybe you hadn't had lunch yet . . ."

"No, I never . . ." Carol hesitated. Ordinarily she never mixed socially with her clients, but she heard herself saying, "All right, Mister Cooper. It so happens I haven't had lunch yet."

He held up a hand. "Please! Virgil."

She smiled with a feeling of inner relaxation. "All right then . . . Virgil."

Having lunch with him will give me an excuse to

dig into his relationship with Carla and maybe find out what she's told him of her financial status, Carol thought defensively, as she went into the small bathroom off her office to freshen her face. But she couldn't help wondering if that was her whole purpose in going to lunch with this man. For, despite her reservations about him, she couldn't deny a strong pull of attraction for Virgil.

However, Virgil was vague about Carla. He admitted he found her attractive and stimulating. "She's . well, she's a vital sort of person."

As he talked, one brown hand on the table next to :s flipped over in a gesture and brushed her. The ich of his flesh sent a sudden shiver down Carol's ne. She jerked her hand away from the contact i, flustered, bent to her sandwich. They were hav ; lunch in a small restaurant a few doors away from rol's office. Virgil had asked if she wanted a drink fore lunch, but she had refused. A drink in the ddle of the day left her feeling drowsy.

After a moment, she sneaked a look at him. He had ished his lunch and was stoking his pipe. She had en wondered why pipe smokers fussed so with ir pipes, cleaning out the dottle, tamping the to-eco so carefully, then striking a number of wooden tches before a satisfactory light was attained. Now : found she didn't mind. She watched his slender, oable hands stroke the pipe with the affection he would give to a woman.

And she wondered how those hands would feel on her. The fancy had popped into her mind unbidden. Sternly she forced it from her thoughts.

Over coffee and a cigarette she abandoned her campaign to find out about Carla and switched to the man himself. "On your application form, Virgil, you said you were a painter. What sort of work do you do?"

The full mouth quirked humorously, his hands forming a depreciatory gesture. "At present I'm a commercial artist. Magazine illustrations and all that."

"You say at present. You have plans to become a serious painter?"

"Doesn't everybody?"

"But also on your application you listed a good yearly income. Aren't you happy with it?"

"Money isn't everything." Then he glanced over at her in apology. "I know that's almost a cliché. I don't mean to imply that I think commercial art is all crap and that I'd like to live on the beach and starve while I paint. I'm not sick to death over having a good income. But I do get off to myself once in awhile and paint . . ."

He broke off as though embarrassed. "Shall we go?"

But he had been unusually eloquent, and Carol was warmed by it. And she was sure now that her doubts of him were without foundation.

And then, as they left the restaurant, he let drop a

sual remark that brought all her apprehensions sur-
g back.

"One thing struck me about Carla Mantel. She cer-
tainly seems to have a lot of money, doesn't she?
ean, it's obvious from the way she lives and every-
ing . . ."

EIGHT

Carol was cleaning up her desk late that afternoon when she heard the front door buzzer. Alice had already left. Carol made a sound of annoyance. She wasn't much in the mood to interview people. The problem of what to do about Virgil and Carla had gnawed at her all afternoon.

She went into the reception room and found Wilson Scott standing by Alice's desk. He glanced up with an uncertain smile.

"Hi, Burnsie," he said.

"Well!" Carol said on an explosion of breath. "After last night I didn't expect to see you again!"

"I know," he said miserably. "And I'm sorry. I don't know what got into me last night, but I know you can't just turn love on and off like a faucet."

"Love! That's the first time I've heard that word between us!"

"I've wanted to mention it any number of times. Somehow the right time just never seemed to pop up."

She studied him closely. His glance dropped away, and he ran his fingers through the sandy hair. His tie was askew, his clothes rumpled and his face was stubbled with a faint growth of beard. It was the first time she'd seen him when he wasn't immaculate.

He looked haggard and weary. "I've been thinking about us. I always thought it was just a fun thing but, after facing up to losing you, I'm no longer so sure."

"What am I supposed to say to that?"

"I don't know. I'm not sure." He finished in a rush, "At least have dinner with me."

"I don't know," she said slowly. This was a different Wilson from the man she thought she knew. She came to a sudden decision. "All right, Wilson, I'll have dinner with you. But nothing more than that."

"Of course not, Burnsie. That's all I ask," he said with a humility that was strange to him.

Wilson waited while Carol freshened up. It was already late, and she decided not to go home and change. When she came out, Wilson went into the bathroom and straightened his clothes and combed his hair.

Coming out, he motioned to his face with a rueful smile. "There's nothing I can do about this."

Relenting, Carol went to him and touched the wiry stubble on his cheeks. "That's all right, Wilson. I've heard that a little beard makes a man more virile."

It was a bad choice of words. She realized that the instant they were out. His eyes caught fire and he seized her fingers, bringing them to his lips.

She tore her hand away. "Oh, no! Just dinner, nothing more!"

She found her resolutions wavering during dinner. Wilson was unusually solicitous, and she began to experience a return of feeling for him. All during the evening she kept a wary eye out for the brunette with the burning eyes. Once she thought she saw her in a crowd, but she decided she had made a mistake.

She had a good time, and she had mellowed enough by the end of the evening to ask Wilson in for a nightcap.

Over his drink Wilson said, "Burnsie, I know now that I am in love with you."

Carol laughed lightly. "You're a lawyer, remember? Don't say anything that can be used against you in court."

"Burnsie, I'm serious. Tell me you love me." He reached out and took her hand.

She stiffened and tried to draw away. "I'm not ready for that yet, Wilson. Why can't we leave it as it is between us? For a time anyway?"

But she had made another mistake; she had put more feeling into her voice than she intended.

He pulled her into his arms roughly. The impact against his hard, muscular body drove the breath from her. For a moment she fought him. All at once she relaxed with a sigh and came to him.

"All right, Wilson, all right," she said softly.

She took him by the hand and led him into her bedroom. She stood by the bed and removed her clothes. She had given in to him as the easiest solution out of a bad situation. But the rustle of his clothes as he quickly tore them from him aroused her.

He was too quick for her; he was undressed before she was. He stepped close and pulled her naked body against his.

Once again she tried to pull away. "Please, Wilson . . . I have to take my hair down."

"No," he muttered. "The hell with that."

His hands dug into her flesh, and he was at her breasts like a greedy child. With a moan she arched to him as he took an erect nipple in his mouth. Carol's desire vaulted.

"Oh, yes, Wilson! Hold me . . . hold me!" she pleaded.

He picked her up and stretched her across the bed without ever taking his mouth from her breast. He lay on one elbow beside her, his lips and hands busy. She lay passive, but the heat coiled ever tighter in her loins.

He was an expert lover, his blunt-fingered hands rough on her flesh, yet skillful, adept at seeking out the pleasure-buds of her passion.

Then her need became too much to bear. Her body slid along his and she felt his hands in her hair. His mouth came down hard on hers, shutting off her cries. She finally tore her mouth free to gasp for air. His

heated breath scorched her as his mouth moved down to the pulse at the base of her throat.

She lay groaning and ~~thrusting~~ as the tempo of their passion quickened. Then her back left the bed in a tremendous arch, and she screamed aloud in mingled ecstasy and completion, meeting his convulsions with

onder if she's in mourning; Carol thought absentmindedly. She's always in black. It could be her favorite color, of course.

Carol got to her feet warily, her nerves tight with apprehension. The woman stopped across the doorway from her. She dug a cigarette out of her purse, tapped it on a long fingernail and then lit it. All the while her gaze was traveling insolently over Carol.

Carol felt herself flushing. "Now look here . . . what is this all about?"

"You're Carol Burns?" The woman's voice was cold, emotionless.

"Of course I am! You must know that or you—"

"That's right, I do know. I know quite a bit about you. I've spent some time and money finding out."

"Then you *are* the woman I've seen . . ."

"I'm the woman you've seen. I got tired of paying private detectives. I decided to do my own detective work."

"But who are you?"

The woman smiled coldly. "Can't you guess?"

"Of course not!" Carol said angrily.

"My name is Laura Scott. Does that mean anything to you?"

"Of course not," Carol said again. Then she started to smile. "Unless you're—"

"That's right, Miss Burns." The woman nodded. "Wilson Scott is my husband."

Carol dropped back into her chair. She said weakly, "But he never once told me he was married!"

"You're lying, naturally. But that's your problem, Miss Burns." The woman's icy control was slipping. She was in the grip of a great rage. "My problem is this . . . I love my husband and I don't intend to lose him. Is that clear?"

Carol had to grope for words. "I don't see what any of this has to do with me." Even to her own ears the protest sounded weak and full of guilt.

"It has this to do with you. I've learned a little about your kind of business. I've learned that it can't take any sort of open scandal. So, if you keep trying to take my husband away from me, I'll see to it that you're out of business."

"But I'm not trying to take Wilson away from you, Missus Scott! I didn't even know he was your husband."

"I have witnesses to all the times he's spent the night with you. Or a part of the night." The cold smile came again. "I have even witnessed it a couple of times personally. Good-bye, Miss Burns."

Without another word Laura Scott wheeled about and marched out of the office, clutching her purse to her stomach as though trying to press back a growing pain.

Carol was left speechless. She put her hands over her eyes and pushed her fingers into her hair. The fingers worked convulsively as though she wanted to tear the hair out by the roots. A random thought struck her. Laura Scott had been in Wilson's arms

mourning a lost husband. Carol giggled, a giggle shaded with hysteria.

Then a scalding shame poured through her—she felt cheap, degraded. And Laura Scott was certainly right about one thing: she *was* vulnerable. If it ever became public knowledge that she, the operator of a matrimonial agency, was a husband-stealer, her business would be ruined.

A lash of fury hit her, and she sat up abruptly. "Damn you, Wilson Scott! Just who do you think I am?"

She reached for the telephone.

When Wilson learned who it was, his voice dropped to an intimate note. "Burnsie! Hey, I'm sorry about last night. But I thought I'd better take off with the mood you were in."

"Wilson, I just had a visitor."

The tone of her voice must have warned him, for he said guardedly, "A visitor? How does that concern me?" He tried a laugh. "I don't know any of those kooks who come to you for help."

"This particular kook you know very well. Her name is Laura Scott," Carol said icily.

"Laura!" His voice dropped to a whisper. "Oh, no!"

"You know I was just sitting here thinking, Wilson," she hissed. "My hearing must be going bad. I've never heard you mention having a wife!"

"Burnsie, listen," he said frantically. "I can explain."

"Maybe you'd just better do that."

"It's like this . . . we haven't been happy together in years. I've been—"

Carol broke in. "I suppose that's why she threatened me if I don't quit seeing you? That's the way she goes about showing her disinterest?"

"Laura's a funny woman. She doesn't want me, but she doesn't want anyone else to have me, either."

"Oh, I don't see anything so funny about that. You know something else, Wilson?" She lowered her voice.

"Yes?"

"In one respect your wife and I see eye to eye. I don't want you, either. Now what do you think about that?"

She hung up on his spluttering. Almost at once the phone began ringing again. She let it ring. She sat forward in her chair, her fingers digging into her hair.

NINE

In a little while Alice's head poked around the
lge of the door. "Carol?" she asked worriedly.
Aren't you going to answer the phone?"

Carol raised her face and snarled, "No! And get the
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The tears came then. Carol dropped her head onto
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uzzer.

"Virgil, I . . ." She knuckled at her moist eyes and tried without success to pin her hair back.

Unexpectedly, he reached out and touched her hair with the back of his hand. "Leave it," he said softly. "I like it that way."

His tenderness brought on another attack of tears. "Oh, Virgil!" she wailed.

"Would you like to tell me about it?" he asked gently. "You don't have to, if you'd rather not."

She hesitated, her eyes probing his face. "I . . . I'd rather not. Not right now, Virgil. Maybe some other time."

He nodded understandingly. "Carol, I just had an idea. It's a nice day and I haven't been down to the beach in a long while. How does a ride and a dinner down that way strike you?"

"You know, it just occurred to me. I haven't been to the beach since coming to Los Angeles and I used to practically live there." She finished in a rush, "I'd love to go, Virgil. Simply love it!"

She halted abruptly and glanced around the office in dismay. "What am I saying? It's only the middle of the afternoon!"

"So? The marriage business would go out of style if you took an afternoon off?" he asked gravely.

She laughed suddenly and swung her arms. In direct contrast to her mood of a few minutes ago, she now felt carefree, gay, even a little silly. "You're right, Virgil. People will always be getting married, and I don't get asked to the beach every day."

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She bit back what she had been about to say. She had been about to tell him that Wilson never took her to the beach because he sunburned too easily. But she had had enough of Wilson Scott for one day! Or any other day, now and forever. She made a move to put up her hair, and Virgil caught her hand.

"No, Carol, leave it like that. Do you know I've never seen you with your hair that way?" His eyes were suddenly warm and tender. "When I came in here a few minutes ago and found you like that, you looked prettier than I've ever seen you. Even in tears."

"You're running over with blarney. Even so, I love

She tucked her arm in his and dimpled up at him, hair swinging free. "I'm ready, if you are."

It was a warm day with a Santa Ana blowing in from the south, sweeping the sky clear of smog. It is mid-afternoon when they neared the beach.

Virgil drove a rakish little sports car. It was a few years old, but it was in good condition. Carol had been surprised when she saw it. Somehow she had imagined him driving a more sedate automobile. And, when he got into the little car, folding his long legs like a grasshopper, he astonished her again. From the glove compartment he took a plaid driving cap and put it on his head.

Her laughter was sudden and joyous. He glanced und at her with his shy grin, but he didn't speak.

Instead he set the cap at a rakish angle, deliberately and put the little car in motion.

All at once Carol knew that this man was full of surprises, and she was glad, very glad, she had accepted his invitation.

She settled back to enjoy herself. The car was snug for the two of them, and Carol could feel the warmth of his thigh against hers. She tilted her head back, letting the wind catch her hair. The tension loosened inside her, and she felt better than she had in a long while.

Virgil drove in silence most of the way, tooling the car in and out of heavy traffic with ease. And then, a short distance from San Pedro, he spoke thoughtfully "You know, Carol, when I have a problem in painting, like balance or light or handling of certain colors, I try to look at it from a different angle. I try for a new perspective."

She looked at him gravely. "And does that always solve your problem?"

"Not always. But more often than not."

"And is this supposed to apply to me?"

He glanced over at her, his eyes measuring her. He said quietly, "I'd say that was your decision to make."

They drove for another few miles in silence. Apparently of the opinion she didn't want to discuss her problem further, Virgil finally said, "It's too bad we didn't bring swim suits along. It's a good night for a dip. Even after dark it should still be warm."

"Oh, yes, why didn't we? I haven't been in the ocean in ages."

She slipped out of her tailored jacket. Her blouse was sheer, hugging the full thrust of her breasts suggestively. His glance swung again to her, lingering on her breasts. Without thinking she arched her back. A trace of a smile touched his lips.

"You know, it's a little ridiculous, even ironic," Carol said pensively. "I run an organization dedicated to bringing people together. I've mated a male barber to a female barber, a policewoman to an ex-convict, a school teacher to a truck driver, a woman whose hobby was collecting house plans to a carpenter who wanted to build a dream house for the right girl. The point is, I don't do very well when it comes to my personal life. As I'm sure you guessed when you walked in on the waterworks display."

"The question being, who does a sick doctor go to? That's usually the toughest nut to crack."

He let one hand drop from the wheel to cover both of hers which were folded in her lap. It was a strong, sensitive hand. Unthinking, she turned her hands over and returned his pressure. Strength seemed to flow from his flesh into hers. Then his hand slipped down and curved along the inside of her thigh. She tensed, and he started to withdraw his hand. With a sigh she caught it and returned it to her thigh.

When they entered San Pedro, Virgil suggested a well-known restaurant for dinner.

Carol sat up. "No! I don't want to eat in some

fancy place. I know!" She gave a little leap. "Let's find a drive-in and have hamburgers and a malt. I haven't done that in ages!"

He glanced over at her in amusement. "To hear you talk, one would think you've been living in a glass cage somewhere."

"But I have, don't you see?" she cried. "I have!"

They found a drive-in, and Carol gorged herself on two thick hamburgers and a huge malt while Virgil watched her with increasing amusement. After they left the drive-in, the afternoon drew to a close. Virgil drove slowly south along the highway bordering the ocean. The sun sank like a fireball dropping into the sea. The afterglow was pink and brilliant.

"I know a place down the coast where you can drive right out onto the beach," Virgil suggested.

Carol sat up. "Oh, let's! That would be lovely."

It was full dark when Virgil found the spot he had in mind. The stretch of beach was lonely and the only sign of life was a bonfire about a mile or more farther down.

Virgil shut off the motor and leaned back with a sigh. "How about a stroll along the sand?"

"Oh, yes!" she cried eagerly.

You're acting like a silly schoolgirl, she told herself sternly.

But the admonition did nothing to dampen her spirits. Quickly she removed her shoes, stripped off her hose and got out of the car. The sand was still warm to her feet.

After a moment Virgil, his shoes and socks off and his trousers rolled up, joined her. He groped for her hand, and they started for the water a few yards away.

A wave came in, whispering along the sand, and foamy fingers of surf curled around Carol's feet. She yelped. The water was icy. And then she pulled up her skirt above her knees and ran splashing into the water. Virgil held back. She ran out a few yards and turned her back to the oncoming wave. All she could see of Virgil was a lean silhouette against the white sand behind him.

A high wave rolled in, vaulting to her waist. She gasped as she was soaked to the skin instantly. But now the chill was gone, and the water seemed almost warm.

"Virgil, wade out to me," she called out. "It's not too cold when you get used to it."

There was no answer. After a little she started in. As she approached him, he was just stepping out of his shorts. His body was slim and white in the darkness.

"Virgil! You wouldn't dare!"

She heard his low laugh. "Wouldn't I?"

He ran past her, ran with his knees high and driving. And then he left his feet in a low dive and disappeared from sight. Almost without volition, her own hands were busy stripping her clothes away. In a matter of seconds she was completely naked.

She started toward the spot where she had last seen him. She paused, squinting into the dark heaving sea

in an effort to locate him. Then she saw him, riding the crest of a mighty wave. The wave rose higher blotting out the stars low on the horizon. And then she was engulfed by it. Virgil swept toward her, and she yelled at the top of her voice. As he went by, he seized her hand and they were tumbled over and over in a tangle of arms and legs.

Carol was amazed at his strength as he held her with one arm around her waist and fought the wave with the other until he finally brought them upright and fighting for breath in waist-deep water. As the water drained away from them, Virgil's hand moved tentatively up to cup her breast. She let her breath go and turned her face up. She pressed his hand against her breast and opened her mouth for him. His mouth was gentle and tasted of the sea. Cleaved to him, she began to tremble. At that moment another huge wave rolled in and caught them.

Carol clung desperately to him and they rolled over and over, locked together, until they lay spent and gasping on the beach. Virgil started to get up. She clutched at him. His body was wet and slippery from the sea, and she couldn't manage a firm grip.

Laughing, Virgil sprang to his feet. He stooped and deftly scooped her up in his arms and carried her up onto the dry sand. Still in his arms, Carol twisted and squirmed, seeking his mouth. With a moan she took his tongue. Her fingers danced in a frenzy along the hard muscles of his back. Desire raged through her like a brush fire. She yearned toward him with every

fiber of her being. She felt a dim astonishment at herself. She had never felt this way toward any man before. With Wilson Scott love-making had been fun, a search for sensation. But she felt she would die within the next few minutes if she didn't have this man.

He found a dry patch of sand and placed her gently on her back. As he started to stand up, Carol posed provocatively and pulled him down to her.

He held off from her. His knuckles grazed her thigh and her abdomen contracted and she felt an explosion of heat in her belly. With his tongue he teased her nipples into quivering readiness. With his lips and fingers he stroked and caressed her body, bringing it to a hysterical pitch of desire. Carol was in constant motion. The sand scraped her back like a nest of steel filings; her wet hair was matted with it.

When he finally took her, Carol was roaring ready. Her hips were already moving in the rhythm of love when she rose to meet him.

She fastened her fingers in his hair and ground her mouth ceaselessly on his. Her partially controlled world crumpled under the assault of the man in her arms. Barbs of stinging pleasure knifed through her as the surf roared in her head and a mighty wave gathered force in her, caught her and carried her to unimaginable heights of ecstasy. And then she was tumbling down, ever down. And she fell, half-fainting, pulling Virgil down with her.

Her expiring scream was high and piercing above the roar of the surf.

When her world was sane again, a sound of rich laughter poured from her. Without opening her eyes, she murmured, "And I thought you were shy."

There was no answer. She opened her eyes with a start of fright. "Virgil?"

By her side he stirred and came up on one elbow. "I'm here, Carol. I'm right here."

She groped for his hand and placed it on her breasts. The jets of his breath were cool on her fevered skin.

He said musingly, "I guess I am shy around ~~strange~~ people. I'm uncertain with people until I get to know them well."

"And I'm not strange people?"

"Not anymore."

"When?"

"Today. When I saw you with your hair down. That's when I knew."

"Knew what, darling?" She held her breath for his answer.

"Knew that I loved you," he said simply.

She halfsat up and clutched him to her. "Me, too, darling! Me, too! Before tonight I wouldn't have thought it possible I could ever feel like this. But after tonight . . ."

"After tonight?"

"After tonight nothing matters but you, darling Virgil. I'm yours, all yours."

"Carol, promise me something. Promise me you'll

leave your hair swinging free like it's supposed to be."

"Whatever you say, darling."

"That's what threw me at first, you know," Virgil smiled.

"What threw you?"

"The hair. And the clothes, of course." His laughter was low. "You know what I thought? I thought here was a career woman plus, an IBM machine."

"Maybe you weren't far wrong, darling," she said.

"No, I don't believe that"

She sat up abruptly. "Virgil, don't take this wrong . . . but why?"

"Why what?"

"Oh, don't be dense!" she snapped impatiently. "You need to go to a marriage agency about as much as a movie starlet."

In the starlight she saw his teeth gleam whitely in a grin. "The moment of truth, eh? All right, Carol." He heaved a sigh. "I was on an assignment. A magazine editor is running a story with a lonely hearts background. He wants me to illustrate it. So . . . I thought I needed a little insight into the workings, so to speak."

"Why, you sneaky bum!" Then she laughed and leaned forward to kiss him. His lips were faintly cool and still tasted of salt. And she couldn't resist asking, "And Carla? What about Carla?"

"What about her?"

She stirred impatiently. "Virgil!"

He laughed softly. "I think I'd get tired carrying
her money around on my back."

"Ah-h, darling!"

She launched herself at him, and they tumbled over
and over on the sand.

TEN

The next few days were the happiest o Carol's life. She was gloriously, insanely happy. Sh had never been in love before and she wallowed in greedily. She saw Virgil Cooper every day and mos of the night. She neglected the agency shamefully leaving it almost entirely in Alice's care.

Alice told her that Wilson called nearly every day Carol refused to talk to him. When she did by chanc get him on the phone, she hung up immediately There was room in her life for only one man now She was so happy that she suffered a moment of apprehension now and then. It was almost too good to b true, too good to last. But she always dismissed he fears as sheer superstition.

Virgil began to paint her. They would spend long warm afternoons on the beach. While Carol sunned

growing slowly nut-brown. Virgil set up his easel a few yards away and painted her. She wore a brief bikini that was little more than two scarlet strips of cloth across her loins and breasts.

One afternoon she told him laughing, that she was sure the picture would be obscene when he was done.

He scowled at her, the gray eyes almost black with his disapproval. "Never could anything be obscene between us, Carol. Never!"

"I'm sorry, darling," she said contritely.

She leaped up and ran over to him, throwing herself into his arms. As they fell onto the sand she whispered near-obscenities in his ear. The strip of beach was practically deserted. Carol pulled his head down between her breasts. She felt the now-familiar leap of desire at each new touch of his hands. He moved his mouth down to the pulse at the base of her throat. His fingers were feather-light on her abdomen, her thighs. With a giggle she reached around behind her and untied the strip of cloth binding her breasts.

Her freed breasts rose toward him, white as snow in contrast to the rest of her. She murmured, "There! That feels much better."

"That's against the law, don't you know that? And do you want to start a stampede right here on the beach?"

"I want to start . . . this!"

He grunted in response to the touch of her hand. In one smooth, easy motion he stood up with her in his

arms and strode rapidly toward the bluff less than fifty yards away. There were several large rocks grouped around the base of the bluff. It was a private place, a place almost as private as her bedroom.

As he walked with her, Carol marveled at herself. She was completely without shame these days. A week ago she would never have dreamed of such a thing as making love on a beach in mid-afternoon. But, as he rounded the towering rocks with her, as he kneeled to place her tenderly on the warm sand, it seemed completely right. Still kneeling, he removed his trunks. Her breathing quickened at the sight of him. She raised herself to peel away the strip of cloth, baring her loins to him. He fell toward her, catching himself with a hand on each side of her. Carol rose to meet him with a tangle of arms and legs. She twined her fingers in his hair and guided his mouth to her breast.

As their bodies clashed, all thought was blotted out and she became all sensation. There was no need for love-play. The ride across the sand in his arms had stimulated her imagination and fired her blood. Her ecstasy was endless, overwhelming.

When release came, she sank her teeth into the soft flesh of his shoulder to muffle her screams. A final shudder gripped her and she rose a last time to meet him, then fell back onto the sand.

She cradled his head on her heaving breasts, her fingers stroking his hair. "Oh, my darling, do you

know what you do to me? But you can't know. You simply can't!"

And then, for the first time in over a week, Carol found herself with an evening alone. Virgil told her he had an appointment he couldn't break. She didn't question him about it. It never once entered her mind to distrust him. And besides she was just as glad to spend an evening alone. The pace had been hectic, and she needed a breathing time.

She was stretched out full-length on the couch in slacks and sweater, listening to music and contemplating a bath and bed when the doorbell brought her fully awake. Carol threw open the door to be confronted by an enraged Carla Mantel. Without waiting for an invitation, she pushed past Carol and into the apartment.

Inside, she glared suspiciously around, then wheeled on Carol. Her full figure was incased in a glittering yellow sheath that hugged her curves like the skin of an overripe fruit. Her eyes glittered; her lips worked silently for a moment before she finally spoke.

"Where is he?" she demanded, her voice rusty with anger.

Carol said blankly, "Where is who?"

"Don't play dumb with me, Carol! Damn you, I paid for him and he's mine. I want him!"

"Oh, you must mean Virgil."

"Yes, I mean Virgil," Carla snarled. "I paid you

She stepped forward and took Carla's arm in a firm grip. She started to lead her toward the door. Carla seemed to go willingly enough. And then, just short of the door, she swung about.

She came at Carol, muttering, "Out of my head, I?"

Carla was all nails, clawing and scratching. Carol ducked away for a few seconds, covering up as best she could, then straightened up, knocking Carla's hands aside. She hit the redhead a stunning blow across one breast. The force of the blow spun Carol half around, and Carol followed up her advantage. She seized the woman's arm and doubled it up behind her back. Carla screamed piercingly. In a single rush Carol sent her stumbling from the apartment.

She closed and locked the door, fighting for breath. When Virgil Cooper sloughed off a woman, the world didn't take kindly to it. At least Carla didn't.

"Keep your cast-offs away from my door, Virgil," Carol sang to herself. Then she laughed aloud, a laugh rich in female triumph.

She recalled Carla's threat. Anyone with her money naturally had influence in certain circles. Undoubtedly she could cause trouble, bad publicity for the agency if nothing else. But Carol found she didn't much care. Virgil was far more important to her than any loss of business.

Humming under her breath, she went into the bathroom and ran a hot bath in the sunken tub. She sat

down dreamily into the scented water and floated serenely. She stayed until the water began to grow cold. Then she got out and dried herself thoroughly. She stood staring into the mirror, debating whether she should pin her hair up before going to bed.

The doorbell rang. Carol swore an unladylike oath. She pulled a sheer robe around her nakedness and marched to the door.

She threw it open. "Now look, Carla—"

Wilson Scott stood weaving in the doorway. He was drunk, the alcohol fumes powerful on his breath. His clothes were wrinkled and slovenly and he had a day's growth of beard.

"Burnsie, I have to talk to you," he muttered.

She said frantically, "Wilson, you can't stay! You've got to leave immediately!"

"Burnsie, I've got to talk to you."

"We've said all there is to say."

"That's where you're wrong." He wagged a finger at her, leering. "I told you Laura and me were through. She's agreed to a divorce. You hear that? I'm free as a bird. Whoo-ee!" He spun around, flapping his hands.

"I couldn't care less." She ran to him and took his arm. She tried to pull him toward the door but he held back, digging his heels into the carpet.

She fell to pleading. "Wilson, please go. I beg you, please!"

He swayed toward her. "How about a kiss, Burnsie?" He narrowed his eyes craftily. "It's been a long time."

All at once she experienced a lurch of terror. She started to dart toward the door, and he lunged. His hand caught in the flimsy front of her robe and ripped it from her. The force of his lunge carried him toward the open door. He slammed it shut, falling against it, and Carol heard the lock click.

Wilson turned around. He sucked in his breath at the sight of her brown and white nakedness. He waved a reproving finger at her. "Been out in the sun, haven't you? Warned you about that."

He lumbered toward her, and Carol backed up until she was against the end of the couch. She knew real fear now. He was just drunk enough to do her harm. She slid along the couch, her eyes never leaving him. Then her arm brushed the lamp on the end table, and it crashed to the floor. Startled, she took an involuntary step forward, and he had her by the arm.

He pulled her against him brutally. His breath was sour. "Burnsie, I love you. Hear me? Love you. We can get married now. Only a short time and the divorce will come through. Then we can do it."

His loose mouth closed on her neck. Carol began to fight him. His powerful fingers dug into her flesh like claws. Her fear increased. One hand gripped cruelly on her breast and squeezed. Carol screamed

He hit her clumsily across the mouth. She screamed again.

The doorbell rang.

She grew still, listening.

A voice called her name. And then, before her horrified eyes, the door flew open with a splintering crash and Virgil Cooper charged through the doorway.

He came to a skidding halt, and his eyes went dead at the sight of Carol naked in Wilson's arms.

"Oh, no," she whispered.

She tried again to free herself, and Wilson's arms tightened convulsively.

"Virgil, listen to me!" she cried. "It's not what you think. He forced his way in here!"

"Did he, Carol?" Virgil's voice was quiet, completely without emotion. "And I suppose you always answer the door in the buff? Or isn't that the way it seems, either?"

Wilson tensed at the sound of Virgil's voice. Now he shoved Carol away from him and lurched around. He sneered at Virgil. "Who's this, Burnsie? One of your sex freaks?"

Virgil appraised Wilson coolly. Now his temper showed. The tanned features tightened, the gray eyes hardening like winter ice. "You're drunk, friend," he said evenly.

"That's right, I'm drunk. But not too drunk."

Wilson started across the room. Virgil set himself,

his fists knotting. Wilson charged and the two men came together. Wilson was the heavier and his size gained for him the initial advantage. They fell to the floor with Wilson on top. Now he got a knee on Virgil's shoulder and pinned him to the carpet. He raised his fist and brought it down like a maul at Virgil's head.

Carol glared at Virgil in disgust. "You're an animal. He's too drunk to know what he's doing!"

A measure of sanity returned to Virgil's eyes. He scrubbed a hand down across his face.

"I talked to Carla tonight. I told her about us. She made threats against you. After leaving her I got worried," Virgil said slowly. "I came here to check to see if you were all right. At the door I heard a scream and found this!" His eyes were alive with agony.

Carol said desperately, "I tried to explain, but you wouldn't listen!"

"But how can I believe you after what I saw?"

Carol looked away. She said in a dead voice, "I have no more faith in me than that . . ."

"I want to have faith in you, Carol. But . . . we knew about this Scott guy. But I thought it was all over between you two."

"It is, darling. It was over before that first night on the beach."

"That's what I told Carla tonight when she tried to tell me about Scott. I told her I already knew about him, but that it was all over. She laughed at me, called me a fool."

Dammit, Carol thought dully, *does everybody care now about my private life? So much for the Jekyll and Hyde existence I was so fond of!*

"If you don't believe me, you'd better leave."

She waited, holding her breath, not daring to look

around at him. After a little she heard the shuffle of footsteps and heard the splintered door close softly.

On the floor Wilson stirred, moaning.

Her feet dragging, Carol went into the bathroom for a cold towel and a basin of water.

ELEVEN

The next morning Carol was at her desk early. She was in a severely tailored suit, her hair pinned primly back. She was determined to get back into her routine. Her school-girl romance was over.

And it was about time, she concluded, after a couple hours in the office. During the two weeks Carol had played at being in love, Alice had succeeded in making a chaos out of the office. She plunged in to work with a will.

During Alice's lunch hour, Carol received two phone calls. Each time she answered with trepidation, expecting it to be either Wilson or Virgil. She didn't want to talk to either one. She had left instructions with Alice not to put them through if either called.

The first call was from a middle-aged widow from Kansas City. She wanted an escort for the evening.

Carol had been recommended to her by a friend who had been out several months ago. "Martha told me about this Southern military gentleman. She said she had a simply marvelous time with him," the widow gushed. "Do you suppose I could have him for the evening?"

"I'm sure you can," Carol said. She took the woman's name as well as the hotel where she was staying.

After the woman hung up, Carol called Captain Jeffers and gave him all the necessary information.

The second phone call was puzzling.

When Carol answered the ring in her crisp fashion, a man's voice said, "Hi, babe. I called your place but you weren't there. I just wanted to say it's all set up tonight for both you gals."

Carol fre-
pardon?"

"Aw, co-
coarse. "Do
this is."

"I'm afrai-

"Then w-

Definitely:
Carol Burns

"Oops! F-

The phc-
hung up. S-
kooky call

something about this one rang a faint alarm far back in her mind. She made a mental note to ask Alice about it.

But she was busy the rest of the day, and it slipped her mind.

The next morning she came in early again and went immediately to work. At mid-morning she glanced up as the door opened and saw Sergeant Crowley.

"Why, sergeant!" she said brightly. "How are you this morning?"

"Not so good, Burns, I'm afraid," he said mournfully. His brown eyes were more disillusioned than usual. "I feel like seven kinds of a bastard about what I'm about to do, but I have no choice."

Crowley fumbled in his pocket for a folded paper and gave it to her.

It was a warrant for her arrest. She stared at it in wonder, then looked up at him in question. "What is this all about, sergeant? What have I done?"

"Two of your clients were arrested late last night for soliciting."

Carol felt a ball of fear growing in her stomach. "Who—who were they?"

Crowley consulted his notebook. "Trindle and Trindle. There's no doubt about it, Burns. Each had the names of five men in their purse. All your clients, all the names you gave them. And the two girls admitted they were registered with you. We received a telephone tip and caught both of them in the act. This is

usually a job for the vice squad to come after you, but I volunteered to do it since I know you and all."

Carol's thoughts were bitter. The dark and white pair, the ones she'd had doubts about. Had doubts about and would certainly have checked out more thoroughly if not for the stupid fling with Virgil Cooper! Truly she had been away from the office too long and now she was about to pay for it.

Crowley was speaking, his low voice apologetic. "So I'm left with no choice, Burns. I have to take you in."

"It's all right, sergeant. I understand," she said tonelessly.

"I've got an unmarked car out front. We'll try to attract as little attention as possible."

Carol went to get her jacket and purse. She led the way out to the reception room. Alice glanced up from her desk.

"Oh, Carol! I'm sorry but he wouldn't let me ring you . . ." Her voice died as she got a closer look at Carol's face. "What is it? What's wrong?"

Carol quickly explained what had happened.

"Those two! I thought something was going on. They've been hanging around the office, taking calls here."

Carol remembered the strange call she had received yesterday. She glanced quickly at Crowley. The fact that the two girls had been taking calls in the office wouldn't help her cause any. But the sergeant was gaz-

ing off into space, elaborately pretending he wasn't hearing a word.

Alice was still talking. ". . . wanted to tell you about those two, but you haven't been around the office much lately." Her voice rose to a wail. "You know you haven't!"

"I know I haven't, Alice. Don't fret. I'm not blaming you. Whatever's happened is my responsibility."

She left the office with Alice in tears behind her.

Crowley drove downtown with her and stayed around while she was charged and booked. He tagged along with her like a faithful dog. Then, through his intercession, she was locked into a small room just off the Receiving Desk instead of in a cell. There was a telephone in the room, and Crowley told her she could stay there until someone came down to get her out.

The only attorney she knew was Wilson Scott. She hated to call him after the scene the other night, but she had very little choice. His voice was cool on the phone. "Good morning, Burnsie. I'm pretty busy right now." Then his voice softened. "I'm sorry about the other night. I guess I was a little under the weather, but the news about Laura divorcing me came so suddenly. I'll see you soon and we'll talk about it further."

Carol sat with her head in her hands until he ran down. Then she said in a dead voice, "Wilson, I'm in trouble. I need your help."

His voice sharpened. "Trouble? What trouble?"

"I've been arrested."

She heard him suck in his breath. "Arrested! What the hell for?"

Carol felt a strange reluctance to tell him. "I . . . it's kind of involved. I'm charged with pandering and—"

"Pandering! Don't you know this call may be monitored?" His voice quickened with panic. "I can't get involved in something like that! You and those damned freaks of yours! I've told you—"

"Wilson, I don't want a lecture. I'm asking you a simple question . . . will you come down and get me out?" Her voice broke. "I have nobody else to turn to, Wilson!"

"You should have better sense than to ask me, Burnsie. I'd be out in the cold in a minute if my firm ever learned—"

There was a click as the phone was cradled. Carol let the receiver fall back, and she sank down onto a hard bench. She ground the heels of her palms in her eyes and ran her fingers into her hair. After some time she heard the door open and close, but she didn't look up.

A familiar voice said gently, "Carol?"

She glanced up to see Virgil. He stood with his hands in his pockets, the cold pipe clenched in his mouth. She felt a great leap of gladness. She strove to keep her face straight.

She said coldly, "Did you come down to gloat?"

"Not to gloat, Carol. To help, if I can."

"To help?" she echoed.

For the first time she saw that the door was open behind him. Sergeant Crowley stood in the doorway. He winked and made a circle with his thumb and forefinger.

Carol surged to her feet. "Darling, how did you find out?"

"Alice called me. She was sort of upset but I finally got the gist of it. I came as soon as I could."

She sprang at him, burrowing her face into the familiar tobacco scent. She fought back tears. "Oh, Virgil, I'm such a mess!" she wailed.

"It's all right, sweetheart, it's all right." He patted her shoulder. Then he said briskly, "Suppose we blow this joint?"

He had already arranged for bail, and she was free to go. He led her out and to the little sports car in a parking lot up the street. Carol came into his arms with a sob. He let her cry it out. After a time he gave her a handkerchief and told her to blow. Then he kissed her wet eyelids and her mouth. His lips tasted of the salt of her tears, and Carol thought of that first night on the beach and all the days and nights since.

As though he read her mind, Virgil whispered, "You know, our swim suits are in the trunk. Let's take the rest of the day off and go to the beach. How about it?"

"Oh, yes, let's! Let's do. No!" She sat back. "Dammit, I can't, Virgil. I have to go back to the office. I

have to do something to straighten this out. Do you realize I could lose my license over this mess?"

He shrugged. "I can think of worse things."

She stiffened, then slowly relaxed. "I know, darling, I know. But not yet." Her voice hardened. "When I quit, I'll quit with a clean slate. I'm not going to be *run* out of business!"

"All right, if that's the way you want it. But I'll tell you one thing, young lady." He leveled a forefinger at her. "I'm not about to marry a machine."

"Virgil!" she yelped. "Is this a proposal?"

"You can take it anyway you like," he grumbled.

"Then I accept." She threw her arms around him. She ran the tip of her tongue into his ear. He shivered and reached for her.

"Oh, no! Not yet. You don't want to marry a jailbird." With a solemn expression, she sat back, her arms folded primly in her lap.

Grumbling, he put the car into motion and drove away. As he headed the car up the street, Carol said, "First we'll go by my apartment. I want to change clothes and take a bath." She wrinkled her nose in disgust. "Isn't it odd how just being in police headquarters can make you feel dirty?"

TWELVE

Going up to the apartment, Carol asked, "What made you change your mind?"

"Change my mind?"

"Yes. When you found Wilson with me the other night, I was sure you never wanted to see me again."

He looked at her with a faint grin. "A guy *can* change his mind, can't he? Women do it all the time. Right then I was sore, but when I cooled down I decided you could be telling the truth. I was going to give you a chance to explain but I've been . . . well, busy at something."

"I'm glad you did change your mind, darling." She und and squeezed his hand. "And it was all over with Wilson. He was drunk that night and forced his way in. He's a lawyer, you know. The only one I know. I called him from the station to come down and get me out. He hung up on me."

At the door she said, "The landlord went into our house when he saw this door. He fixed it, but he'll present me with the bill."

"The cost of playing knight-to-the-rescue is high these days," he said solemnly. "In the days of yore a knight could storm a castle to rescue a maiden in distress, break down all sorts of doors and never be bill for it."

She left him in the living room and started toward the bedroom. In the doorway she paused, turning back. "It's only the middle of the afternoon, I know, but I could stand a drink. Mix us a couple of martinis, will you, darling? I'll take a quick bath and be right out."

Virgil nodded, and she went on into the bedroom, undressing as she went. She removed every stitch and dropped them into a pile on the bedroom floor. She went into the bathroom and ran a hot tub, resisting the temptation to luxuriate in the steaming water. She had to get to the office and learn what she could about those two . . . what had Crowley called them, the Broads? Yes, and how it fitted them!

She felt a fresh wave of anger at herself. It was her fault. She had been in the business long enough to know that prostitutes, the one-trick-a-night hustlers, found easy pickings among the male members of matrimonial agency. And Carol had trained herself early to recognize them. There were always signs, not at first, in time. If she had kept a close watch over the pair instead of . . .

But Virgil had filled her days and nights to the exclusion of everything else.

Despite her anger, Carol felt her face stretch wide in a foolish grin.

She got out of the tub quickly, dried herself as quickly, belted a robe loosely around her and started toward the living room where he was waiting for her.

He was standing at the end of the bar, staring out the big window. The day was hot and still. Smog hung over the basin like brown smoke from a city-wide holocaust. He turned as she came in, a glass in his hand.

"I didn't wait. I hope you don't mind." He reached for the almost-full pitcher on the bar.

She went quickly toward him, her bare feet whispering in the carpet. The martini he poured for her was delicious.

Virgil set his glass down on the bar. "While you were in the bathroom I went back down to the car. I have something I want you to see. You might call it a surprise."

For the first time Carol saw the oblong, flat package wrapped in brown paper propped against the end of the bar. Swiftly, Virgil untied the cord and peeled away the paper, then leaned it against the bar where the afternoon sun hit it. It was a painting, of course. But not just any painting. It was *her* painting.

She cried, "Darling . . . I didn't know you'd finished it!"

He was grinning at her. "I hadn't. But then I

Then she was in his arms. The robe folded around her like a billowing cloud as he ran his arms around her, one hand spread on her back between the shoulder blades, the other cupping the jut of her buttocks. At the pressure of his hand on her buttocks Carol caved in against him.

His mouth was sweet, then tender, then urgent. Her response was quick, heated, overwhelming. Their tongues met in a slippery dance of desire. They swayed, locked together breast and thigh.

Carol squirmed, trying to get closer to him. She would like nothing better than to be able to crawl under his skin, her blood flowing as one with his, their very bones melding together.

The couch hit the backs of her knees. Unsurprised that they had somehow moved almost the length of the room without her knowing it, Carol slid from his arms and onto her back on the couch. Somewhere during their journey across the room the robe had fallen off. She lay full-length, her eyes slitted, watching him undress. Her breathing was ragged. Her hips moved ever so faintly, without her willing them.

The slanting sunlight behind him placed Virgil in shadow. Undressing, his movements were rapid but precise. Against the sunlight he loomed tall, godlike. And past him she saw herself in the painting. And now there was no doubt she was running toward a man. She was running toward Virgil, ready to hurl herself into his arms.

But there was no need for that. He was here.

Laughter bubbled in her throat, then faded away as he was kneeling on the floor beside the couch. Dimly, she realized that the events of the day, the quick martini, his nearness, his touch—all had made her giddy, the prey to fancy.

But she didn't care! She gloried in it.

With a small cry she reached up and drew his face down to hers. Their mouths met in a grinding kiss. His fingers began their now-familiar exploration of her body.

She wanted him to touch her here. And there. And here. But there was no need to prompt him, to guide him. He seemed to read her mind. The secret places her thoughts touched, his hands and lips caressed. Time ceased to exist for her, only her aroused senses, the sensations trailing Virgil's stroking fingers like exploding firecrackers, had any meaning for her.

His mouth left hers and moved down to her breasts. At the rasp of his tongue across an erect nipple her desire reached an intensity approaching agony. With plucking fingers and sharp cries she urged him onto the couch. He joined her on the couch, and continued to caress. She didn't think her desire could increase. But it could. less, blind, he

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In a thick voice she pleaded, "Darling . . . please! Don't torture me so!"

But it wasn't torture. She realized that when he finally answered her pleadings and joined with her. His prolonged lovemaking had added to her pleasure.

